

## CREATIVE SCEPTICS

## CREATIVE SCEPTICS

*By the same author*

THE SUBTLE KNOT

*Creative Scepticism in Seventeenth-Century England*

# CREATIVE SCEPTICS

BY

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TO  
MY MOTHER AND FATHER



Upon the whole, we are to remember, that some allowances are to be made for every hypothesis that is new-proposed and untried: and that we ought not out of levity of wit, or any private design, discountenance free and fair essays: nor from any other motive, but the only love and concern of truth.

THOMAS BURNET, *The Theory of the Earth*, 2nd ed. (London, 1691), p. 289.

Logic says *tertium non datur*, meaning that we cannot envisage the opposites in their oneness. In other words, while the abolition of an obstinate antinomy can be no more than a postulate for us, this is by no means so for the unconscious, whose contents are without exception paradoxical or antinomial by nature, not excluding the category of being. If anyone unacquainted with the psychology of the unconscious wants to get a working knowledge of these matters, I would recommend a study of Christian mysticism and Indian philosophy, where he will find the clearest elaboration of the antinomies of the unconscious.

*Psyche and Symbol: A Selection from the Writings of C. G. Jung*, ed. Violet S. DeLaszlo (Garden City, N.Y., 1958), p. 86.

The result will be to acknowledge a spade to be a spade and at the same time not to be a spade. To recognize the first only is a common sense view; and there is no Zen until the second is also admitted along with the first.

D. T. SUZUKI, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York, 1964), p. 61.

Through *samādhi*, the yogin transcends opposites and, in a unique experience, unites emptiness and superabundance, life and death, Being and nonbeing. . . . The yogin who attains to *asamprajñāta samādhi* also realizes a dream that has obsessed the human spirit from the beginnings of its history—to coincide with the All, to recover Unity, to re-establish the initial nonduality, to abolish time and creation (i.e., the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the cosmos); in particular, to abolish the two-fold division of the real into object-subject.

MIRCEA ELIADE, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (New York, 1958), pp. 98-9.

The fact is you want more scepticism at the very foundation of your work. Scepticism, the tonic of minds, the tonic of life, the agent of truth—the way of art and salvation.

Letter from Joseph Conrad to John Galsworthy, Nov. 11, 1901, in H. F. Marrot, *Life and Letters of Joseph Conrad* (London, 1935), p. 129.

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## INTRODUCTION

THE pattern of creative scepticism<sup>1</sup> which appears from many directions and with perhaps unexpected consistency throughout the varied essays of this volume is not to be confused with the popular concept of scepticism as dogmatic disbelief. The latter is a part of the heritage of eighteenth-century rationalism, having arisen from that century's characteristic oversimplification of a complex pattern of thought which flourished during the Renaissance both in England and on the Continent and which already had behind it a long history. A glance at this history and a delineation of the component parts of what we shall call creative scepticism will serve to make its recurrence in English, American, European, and even Indian settings far less surprising than it would otherwise be. The trans-national and meta-cultural character of the pattern is one of its most striking features. Such an analysis will also allay the fear that creative scepticism is here being used like Procrustes' bed to force unwilling victims into a brutal and distorting conformity. On the contrary, its appearance in these essays is rather the by-product of glimpsing intermittently and often in quite disparate milieux a beam pointing insistently in the direction of one growing and proliferating conception of truth. Each essay, therefore, marks a spot at which such a beam has appeared. The locus of all the beams is yet to be plotted.

The Greek philosopher Pyrrho, who lived in the fourth century B.C., is the father of creative scepticism, and it is significant for the possible origins of his ideas that he is known to have gone to India with Alexander's army, along with Anaxarchus, a follower of Democritus. Many of Pyrrho's ideas are reminiscent of those with which Indians have long been familiar.

In his search for truth Pyrrho emphasized three key words: *isosothenia*, *epoché*, and *ataraxia*. By *isosothenia* he meant the necessity of balancing every statement by its opposite if one is to

<sup>1</sup> See the author's *The Subtle Knot: Creative Scepticism in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952).

approximate the truth. Just as an isosceles triangle has two equal sides, so the structure of truth must contain balanced opposites. One may, for example, state that all Indians are essentially spiritual-minded, but it will be necessary at once to counter this with the statement that all Indians are essentially materialistic and let this apparent contradiction work in one's mind until through the attempt to reconcile these opposites something close to the whole truth emerges. *Epoché*, meaning suspension of judgment, follows naturally from the balancing of opposites. There is little temptation to make snap judgments if one is always self-reminded that there is probably an equal amount of truth in the opposite of each statement he makes. The purpose of practising these two techniques of truth-seeking was to insure *ataraxia*, that peace of mind which sceptics were seeking along with Stoics and Epicureans, although by way of a different road. Today the name 'ataraxics' has survived as the designation for a series of tranquillizing drugs, including the old Ayurvedic remedy *rauwolfia serpentina*. Pyrrho was seeking to tranquillize the minds of essentially dogmatic men through the intellectual discipline of scepticism.

After Pyrrho, the movement had its ups and downs, and the genuine Pyrrhonists struggled continually to avoid dogmatism (for example, that of the Academic Sceptics) as the rock on which tranquillity of mind could most easily be wrecked. As a precaution, the Roman philosopher Sextus Empiricus in the second century A.D. again emphasized, in the true spirit of Pyrrho, the function of antinomy and paradox as a means of maintaining *iso-sothenia* and *epoché*. During the Middle Ages this kind of scepticism, which we may call positive and creative rather than negative and sterile (as is dogmatic disbelief), found expression in thinkers like Nicholas of Cusa and Abelard. Nicholas, who wrote *Of Learned Ignorance*, emphasized the contradictions and antitheses of the universe on his way to positing ultimate reconciliation (even between the Christian and the Muslim worlds) and a glowing advaitic or non-dualistic experience of the numinous. Abelard wrote his famous treatise *Sic et Non* (*Yes and No*) in order to train the minds of forensic logicians to vigorous and healthy

doubt and so carried on the Pyrrhonian tradition of creative scepticism. From here, to sketch the history of scepticism briefly in its literary manifestations (omitting the Renaissance authors treated in the present book), the line runs from Montaigne and Pascal in France to such seventeenth-century English sceptics as Donne, Browne, Baxter, Taylor, and Glanvill and thence to their Romantic rediscoverers, Blake and Coleridge in England and the Transcendentalists in America. Today the heirs seem to be the Existentialists of France, Germany, and America, whose thought can be shown to share many areas with that of the Orient, particularly with that of India, which perhaps gave the initial impetus to Pyrrho, as I have suggested.

The four principal phases of scepticism can readily be illustrated from the work of Montaigne. Let us look first of all at his definition of scepticism:

'the profession of the Phyrhonian is ever to waver, to doubt and to enquire; never to be assured of anything. . . . Now this situation of their judgement, straight and inflexible, receiving all objects with application and consent, leads them into their ataraxia; which is the condition of a quiet and settled life, exempted from the agitations which we receive by the impression of the opinion and knowledge we imagine to have of things; whence proceed feare, avarice, envie, immoderate desires, ambition, pride, superstition, love of novelties, rebellion, disobedience, obstinacie, and the greatest number of corporall evils: yea by that meane they are exempted from the jealousie of their owne discipline, for they contend but faintly: They feare nor revenge, nor contradiction in the disputations. . . .

'Whosoever shall imagine a perpetuall confession of ignorance, and a judgement upright and without staggering, to what occasion soever may chance; That man conceives the true Phyrhonomie. . . . A mind warranted from prejudice hath a marvellous preferment to tranquility.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'An Apologie of Raymond Sebond', *Essays of Montaigne*, tr. John Florio (New York; London, 1948), Everyman edition, II, 204-5, 207, 208.

All scepticism begins in nescience, in the confession that about all the important concerns of human life man is essentially ignorant. Montaigne illustrates nescience by using a figure, not original with him, in which he compares immature and dogmatic scholars to green stalks of wheat which do not learn to bow their heads until they are full and ripe and have recognized their fundamental ignorance. Montaigne put his own nescience in the least dogmatic form possible when he took as his motto not a statement but a question, '*Que sçais-je?*' ('What do I know?') and used a pair of balances as his emblem. Such intellectual humility is to be found also in a striking form in the *Isa Upanishad*:

Into blind darkness enter they  
That worship ignorance;  
Into darkness greater than that, as it were,  
They that exult in [their] knowledge.

From initial nescience the sceptic moves on to seeing the whole of his world, as far as he can grapple with it, in dualistic terms, such as, for example, body and spirit, reason and faith. Both of these dualisms played an important part in the thinking of Montaigne, as indeed of the whole Renaissance. He would not give up either half of any dualism, convinced that the world cannot be adequately set forth without both terms, nor adequately understood without every possible effort to make these mesh in comprehensive synthesis.

However, the necessity at every moment of finding some means of describing and manipulating the world leads the sceptic on into the realm of paradox, which is the closest linguistic approximation he can make to the truth if he is to salvage both halves of every dualism. Recognizing this difficulty of communication, Montaigne said that what the Pyrrhonians needed was a new language, one not designed principally, like all known languages, to accommodate dogmatic statements. Other thinkers, too, particularly in the East, have been aware of the indispensability of paradox if one is to approximate truth by means of language. In the *Kena Upanishad* it is written:



## INTRODUCTION

It is unknown to those who know and known to those who do not know.

Here, with a glance toward basic nescience and a distrust of logical statement, is set forth obliquely a truth which could not be stated directly, just as in the Bhagavadgita the paradox of killing and not killing is expanded into an insight transcending either position, although not directly statable.

From the farthest bounds of paradox the sceptic moves on into the field of action as the only setting in which truth can be adequately expressed when all the Babel-centred languages of the earth have broken down. Montaigne insists that the result of learning a truth ought to be observable in action, proposing, with tongue in cheek, that a test for the supreme truth of Christianity is easily devised—simply discover those people in the world who are leading the finest lives, and you will have located the adherents of the one true faith! This is reminiscent of Thoreau's prescription for a philosopher as one who has 'not merely to have subtle thoughts nor even to found a school but so to love wisdom as to live, according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and truth'.<sup>1</sup> The sceptic recognizes great action as perhaps the most powerful communicator of truth in a realm which lies beyond that attainable by even the most paradoxical language. As Keats affirmed, all truths must be 'proved upon the pulses' if they are to become meaningful. In this same experimental spirit, Jesus had said, 'If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine'.

These four phases of the sceptic process—nescience, dualism, paradox, and knowing by doing—can be traced down through the history of scepticism in the West, and are discernible also in the Orient, notably in the thought of India. Combined in varying proportions they constitute a recognizable pattern in the writings of each author treated below as well as in the broad movement of Existentialism, whether theistic or atheistic. The implications of

<sup>1</sup> H. D. Thoreau, 'Walden', in *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. C. Bode (New York, 1947), p. 270.

world but for the capturing and holding of a hitherto unnoted variation of the sceptic pattern which I felt could illumine both the living of life and the appreciation of the work in hand. Spenser and Milton in particular came alive in a new way when they could be seen apart from the usual clichés of criticism, by now worn thin. Mutability in Spenser and the fortunate fall in *Paradise Lost* gather increased significance from being considered in the context of the sceptic process. Henry Adams' long quest for wisdom can be seen as a rich prolongation of the first phase of the sceptic pattern, a plaguing nescience. Students can be made to understand that Emerson as the intellectual heir of both Montaigne and the Hindus was not being dogmatic and restrictive when he honestly invited his readers to search out the truth for themselves and to do, to act, to live in order that they might progressively know. Such was his unshakable faith in the oneness of the universe and in man's ability to find the deep connective tissue between himself and his fellows that he did not fear intellectual chaos as a result of such advice.

It is the purpose of these chapters, therefore, not to make use of creative scepticism as a rigid mould but rather to use the pattern flexibly as a tentatively worked out critical instrument by which hitherto unrecognized elements in a given author's work may be discerned or familiar elements seen in new relationships. This is not at all to imply that an author is here rated qualitatively with reference to the number of sceptical elements he embodies in his work. Rather, his own distinctive qualities, whatever they are, may be highlighted and their significance presented more effectively than usual by thus relating them to a very old pattern, which I tried to revive in *The Subtle Knot*, where it proved useful in linking the work of five seventeenth-century authors to an important stream in the history of ideas.

The thought of the Orient first reached me during my freshman year at Reed College, and over subsequent years I had remained sympathetic and interested as I read more widely in it. Consequently I introduced each new class of college freshmen to *The World Bible*, a collection of scriptures, in an attempt to provide

an unfamiliar and hence liberating atmosphere for the exploration of those problems of identity and meaning which, fortunately, students always bring with them to college.

During 1957-59 I had the privilege on two successive Fulbright grants of reading Indian philosophy with Professor S. C. Chatterjee of Calcutta University and of visiting with my husband, Roderick Marshall, more than a dozen Indian universities to lecture to faculty and students on American literature as these universities first introduced the subject into their curricula. The result was to reinforce in my mind and to clarify the ramifications of the sceptic pattern itself, as it is found flowering prolifically in Indian philosophy and providing an indispensable bridge between Eastern and Western thought, particularly at that point of their perhaps closest approximation in the writings of the American Transcendentalists. Indeed, the fact that Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, and others were, through the good offices of their own experience, reenforced by their enthusiasm for seventeenth-century English authors and for the Romanticists, ready to receive sympathetically the Sufi poets and the Hindu scriptures in their mid-century European translations is a source of wonder to the Indians and therefore becomes perhaps the soundest basis for introducing American literature into Indian universities, where between twenty and thirty now offer graduate or undergraduate work in the subject.

The intellectual and spiritual activity which underlies this book now appears established for me as part of an ongoing process, the products of which are from time to time siphoned off into writing which can then be scrutinized and evaluated and whose publication aims to invite such criticism. That the process is continuous and provides a constant but endlessly developing referent can be seen in what happens between books. In casting about for a channel in which to operate next, I picked up the *Confessions* of Augustine, and, before completing the first chapter, I found myself already noting paradoxes reminiscent of those in the Upanishads and an attitude toward God like that later elaborated in Cusanus' *Vision of God*. There is undoubtedly much in Augus-

tine's writing which is not relatable to scepticism, but recognizing what there is gives a heartening basis for appreciation and sets his works face to face with many others of similar tendance for whatever conclusions may be drawn from that confrontation. The ability to make these connections provides the kind of surety which I could not have counted upon twenty or thirty years ago, when in my gloomier moments I foresaw the possibility that the whole sceptic pattern would retreat silently and be lost in the undifferentiated shallows and byways of the history of thought.

Likewise, when I saw a New York performance of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice*, I felt less distressed than theatregoers around me at an inability at once to put into words the significance of the play. For me, it was illuminated, like life, by sporadic flashes of insight, where the author laid bare broad areas of nescience and paradox and knowing-through-action. The play presents, I think, a meaningful contemporary statement of some of the truths of creative scepticism. I do not feel the necessity at the moment of fitting together its varied significances into a rigid or more specifically defined pattern. Thus the continuing efficacy of the sceptic approach in criticism provides not only light along the way but the promise of growing clarity as one continues to read and think and write. Like an enzyme it makes possible the digestion and assimilation of a variety of intellectual food and the deriving of energy from it. As Augustine has said, ' . . . I endeavour to be one of those who write because they have made some progress, and who, by means of writing, make further progress'.<sup>1</sup>

Two of the following essays, those on Coleridge and on Existentialism, are expanded versions of papers in which I summarized my reading and thinking in India for Professor Chatterjee while the three on Emerson, Melville, and Henry James represent rewritten and likewise expanded lectures which I gave at several Indian universities. The latter three were published by the Panjab University, the Coleridge essay in *The Literary Criterion*

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo*, ed. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh, 1871), v. 13 (Letters), 217 (Letter CXLIII).

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at Mysore University, and the Existentialism essay in the *Visvabharati Quarterly* of Visvabharati University, founded by Rabin-dranath Tagore. Reading for the essay on the Cambridge Platonists was done in the Folger Library, Washington, D.C., during the summer of 1955.

I  
EDMUND SPENSER  
MUTABILITY,  
THE SEED BED OF SCEPTICISM



OUT of the continual, goading impingement upon him of the mutability of all things earthly, as contrasted with Heavenly constancy, underscored by a humanist's concern with this world, arose those elements of Edmund Spenser's thought which link him unmistakably with the sceptic tradition. His nescience, his dualistic perceptions, his attraction to paradoxes, particularly the paradox of grace, as insurance against oversimplification, and his emphasis upon action as a creative confrontation of mutability—all these relate him to the tradition stemming from Pyrrho.

What Chaucer treated against a classical background as the wheel of fortune Spenser personalizes as Change, Alteration, Mutability, finally as an insolent queen who challenges the rule of Nature herself. The last tantalizing stanzas of *The Faërie Queene*, probably fragments of an uncompleted book, show Spenser ostensibly presenting an answer to the problem by concluding that although all is subject to mutability on earth, according to Nature's decree (recognized to be ultimate) the more earthly things change, the more they become by dilation what they are in essence so that in their very mutability (because or in spite of it) they return in cycles upon themselves and hence in their intensification move toward perfection. Is not such a pattern exemplified in the adventures of Britomart, who truly becomes herself through the multifarious episodes of her quest for Artegall? Of course, while change may spark the transformation, it cannot finally rule over the destiny of individuals or of the quality which a Spenserian character exemplifies. Mutability's reign, mortised meaningfully into the scheme of things but always an irritant to man, will

cease at the end of time, when all things undergo a final change, 'And from henceforth, none no more change shall see'. That even this answer did not quite satisfy Spenser may be seen in the two poignant stanzas of the projected Canto viii. No matter what the idealism of Spenser and his fellow-men, they in the meantime unfortunately do not live in Heaven but on earth, where mutability reigns supreme,

Which makes me loath this state of life so tickle,  
And love of things so vaine to cast away . . .

With all the force of his vivid idealism he longs for

. . . the steadfast rest of all things firmly stayd  
Upon the pillars of Eternity, . . .  
That is contrayr to Mutabilitie . . .

But no more than the Red Cross Knight on the Mount of Contemplation is Spenser able to linger over this vision. He has work to do—and herein lies his salvation.

In a world like Spenser's, which until that last blissful day is recognized to be continually changing, one finds it, first of all, impossible to be dogmatic for the very good reason that one finds it almost impossible to know anything certainly. What one today decides is the truth must be handled deftly since it may be radically reshaped by tomorrow's experience. Thus nescience springs inevitably from a world which is mutable; in fact, nescience is the first by-product of mutability and holds out, because it prevents any dogmatizing about ends before the end, the far-off promise that change can be used creatively instead of leading to despair and destruction.

The varied circumstances in which Spenser sets forth his perception of nescience indicate that its recognition was persistent and always came to him as a liberating experience pointing toward the truth by clearing away entangling dogmatisms. When the naïve shepherd Cuddy asks Colin whether there can be any other land than their own, Colin berates him as a fool.

Much more there is unkend, then thou doest ken,  
And much more that does from mens knowledge lurk.<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with the chiaroscuro of Spenser's discourse from his earliest work to his latest, this passage implies much more than it says. Behind it lies both the excitement of geographical discovery and a sobering recognition of the vast unknown beyond, the *terra incognita*—facts that to a mind like Spenser's insistently became metaphors.

The prologue to Book II of *The Faërie Queene* further develops the theme of nescience as Spenser tries to answer the objections of the literal-minded to his portrayal of Faërie land. He calls to his aid the rich finds of the explorers and asks whoever heard of Peru, the Amazon, or Virginia until recently.

Yet all these were, when no man did them know.

...

Why then should witlesse man so much misweene  
That nothing is, but that which he hath seene?

(*FQ*, II, Prol., 3)<sup>2</sup>

To disbelieve in Faërie land is another indication of the Cuddy mentality, circumscribed within its own narrow limits. Today's reader takes in stride Spenser's ensuing question about the possibility of other worlds in the sphere of the moon or the stars, not because he is less nescient than Spenser's contemporaries but because the exploration of outer space is now foreseeable. However, the same readers who first objected to the description of Faërie land would also object to the consideration of space travel, and their objection would rest on the assumption that they know certainly exactly what exists and what does not exist. It is this assumption against which the poet strikes out in maintaining the reality of Faërie land, recommending that his detractor

... yield his sence to be too blunt and bace,

That no'te [cannot] without an hound fine footing trace.

(*FQ*, II, Prol., 4)

<sup>1</sup> 'Colin Clout's Come Home Again', ll. 294-5 in *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt, (London [1952]), p. 539.

<sup>2</sup> Subsequent references to poems are to above edition.



The emphasis upon the 'hound fine footing' gives a clue to the sensitivity and tactfulness of the poet's procedure as he moves on from a recognition of mutability to the working out of its epistemological implications, beginning with nescience. His mind will remain flexible and alert to catch intimations of the truth from wherever they come—even from Faërie land.

The most intriguing episode illustrative of the havoc caused by awkwardness and lack of spiritual sensitivity is to be found in the tenth canto of Book VI, where Calidore comes upon Colin Clout piping merrily upon a hill while a hundred lovely nymphs and the three Graces dance about him and are joined by his love 'to whom that shepherd pypt alone'. Unable to restrain his curiosity, Calidore shows himself, and the dancers vanish. Colin breaks his pipe in anger and bemoans the loss, explaining to Calidore,

For being gone, none can them bring in place,  
But whom they of them selves list so to grace.

(*FQ*, VI, x, 20)

Not all Calidore's courteous apologies can restore the dancers, and the reader is left pondering the ways of the Graces and their unpredictability.

The Giant with the scales in Canto ii of Book V represents at once the antithesis of both subtlety and nescience. He has looked at the ills of the world and decided how to remedy them; he will simply make all things equal in the sphere of human activity, as on the earth he will tear down the mountains and make all level or tumble rocks into 'the deepest maine'.

Of things unseene how canst thou deeme aright,  
Then answered the righteous *Artegall*,  
Sith thou misdeems't so much of things in sight?

(*FQ*, V, ii, 39)

How can the Giant weigh the works of Cod in his scales and pronounce upon them when he knows nothing of either the depth of God's counsels or even of the causes and courses of what he sees about him every day?

For how canst thou those greater secrets know,  
 That dost not know the least thing of them all!  
 Ill can he rule the great, that cannot reach the small.

(*FQ*, V, ii, 43)

By a *reductio ad absurdum* Artegall forces the Giant to try to weigh 'winged words', to weigh truth against falsehood and right against wrong. Through his abject failure in each case, it is borne in upon the Giant that he knows nothing about the nature of words, the character of truth (which always sits 'in the midst of the beame alone') or the subtle fact that 'all the wrongs could not a little right downe way'.

The irony of the Giant's assumption that he knows all is made explicit in Spenser's letter to Gabriel Harvey concerning earthquakes, where in his desperation at the fantastic explanations set forth and argued about heatedly, he gives us the two chief roots of such weird reasoning: '*Impostura Daemonum*, and *Ignoratio causarum*. . . . The seconde were speciall, as it were hitting the white in deede, and cleaving the Pinne in sunder.' But behind this reasoned conclusion, as always in Spenser, is the pulsating human experience of which it is the fruit. Confronted with dogmatic pronouncements on the subject of earthquakes, he replies:

'To make shorte, I cannot see, and would gladly learne, howe a man on Earth, should be of so great authoritie, and so familiar acquaintance with God in Heauen, (vnlesse haply for the nonce he hath lately intertaind some few choice singular ones of his priuie Counsell) as to be able in such specialties, without any iustifyable certificate, or warrant to reueale hys incomprehensible mysteries, and definitively to giue sentence of his Maiesties secret and inscrutable purposes.'

(*Poetical Works*, p. 617)

Who is the man, Spenser wonders, who has 'a key for all the lockes in Heaven'?

From those whose ignorance, unacknowledged, breeds dogmatism and intellectual pride we turn to Prince Arthur, who in his

## MUTABILITY, THE SEED BED OF SCEPTICISM

Britomart continually open to intimations of their sought-for mates, their unknown paramours, and poised to right wrongs and succour the distressed along the road, for each adventure may point the way toward the unknown beloved. Britomart displays her nescience by means of a striking figure when she laments on the shore of a tempestuous sea that she may never accomplish her mission since her 'feeble vessell crazed, and crackt' is steered by love and commanded by fortune.

Loue my lewd Pilot hath a restlesse mind  
And fortune Boteswaine no assurance knowes,  
But saile withouten starres against tide and wind:  
How can they other do, sith both are bold and blind?  
(*FQ*, III, iv, 9)

It is in the realms of love and fortune that mutability is most distressing. Britomart's is the normal human reaction to the rudderlessness of nescience; yet the equally unacceptable dogmatic alternative is the patently false assurance of one who thinks he has 'a key for all the locks in Heaven'.

Calidore, also, as the knight of courtesy sets out to destroy the Blatant Beast without knowing either the Beast himself or where to find him, yet he refuses long to be turned aside from his mission—picking up clues as he goes along.

The Blattant Beast (quoth he) I doe pursew,  
And through the world incessantly doe chase,  
Till I him ouertake, or else subdew:  
Yet know I not or how, or in what place  
To find him out, yet still I forward trace.  
(*FQ*, VI, i, 7)

It is not necessary that nescience result in complete hopelessness of ever knowing or that it impede action, as when Calidore lingers for a while among the rustics. Indeed, in the case of Spenser, the reader finds persistent warnings against the dead-end of despair, since another slight turn of Fortune's wheel or a buoyant wave after a crushing one will lift the individual to where

he can view his situation from another vantage point, though the wheel will again turn, and human life will prove to be, like Adonis, 'eterne in mutabilitie'. Early in his career Spenser meditated upon Ovid's line '*Quod caret alterna requie, durable non est*' and paraphrased it near the end of 'September' in *The Shepheardes Calender* as

Whatever thing lacketh chaungeable rest,  
Mought needes decay, when it is at best.

Again, in 'Februarie' Cuddie had complained about the bitter cold, and Thenot, the older and wiser shepherd, had asked,

Must not the world wend in his commun course  
From good to badd, and from badde to worse,  
From worse unto that is worst of all,  
And then returne to his former fall?

This might be considered the stock reply of many of Spenser's poetic predecessors from the Greeks onward, but in having Thenot go on to stress his main concern, beyond the changes of fortune, for the care of his sheep, Spenser even here foreshadows that creative use of mutability which was to represent his carefully elaborated answer to its ever-present challenge. In a mutable world, therefore, a sense of one's own and all men's nescience prevents sloth and keeps the individual alert to whatever elements of truth he may win from his experience. Indeed, the experience itself may turn out to be somehow the answer. Spenser's supreme tribute to nescience is perhaps to be found in his praise of knights whose lineage is unknown and who therefore must win a place in the world through their deeds.

And certes it hath oftentimes bene seene,  
That of the like, whose linage was vnknowne,  
More braue and noble knights haue raysed beene,  
As their victorious deedes haue often shoven,  
Being with fame through many Nations blowen,  
Then those, which haue bene dandled in the lap.

(*FQ*, VI, iv, 36)

It follows inevitably from the world's deeply perceived mutability with its resultant nescience that the poet should exhibit a keen awareness of the dualisms of his experience since it never stands still long enough to enable him to extol its simple oneness, a characteristic which belongs to truth alone, seldom exemplified on earth.<sup>1</sup> Whatever order he can make out of the mutability all around him (though the order itself be temporary and not a prefiguration of unified and absolute truth) will necessarily be expressed in terms of opposites if he means to make a place for both the heights and the depths of his experience; and should he be tempted to linger over half a dualism, the mutability at his elbow will nudge him into an awareness of the other half. This can be seen again and again in Spenser, whether the dualisms be those he shares with his age or variants which are peculiarly his own.

The poet has preserved very neatly for us a description of the process whereby a sensitivity to dualisms is born out of mutability. In the fifty-eighth sonnet of the *Amoretti*, Spenser berates his lady for her self-assurance because it signifies the pride of flesh, known to be frail and like a vain bubble—the sport of time and chance. The higher she stands in her vain assurance, the lower she will fall, 'for on earth nought hath endurance'.

Why then doe ye proud fayre, misdeeme so farre,  
that to your selfe ye most assured arre.

The opening lines of Sonnet 59, in contrast to these closing lines of 58, recall to the reader a pattern of experience similar to that which underlies the conventional shift of mood from grief to joy (or at least to reconciliation) which comes near the end of an elegy.

Thrise happie she, that is so well assured  
Vnto her selfe and setled so in hart. . . .

Between sonnets the poet has altered his point of view, and what looked like foolish and frail pride becomes now, a few degrees farther around the circle, a steadfast and unshakable confidence,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (London [1951]), pp. 314-16.

represented significantly as a ship whose course is true and unwavering. With whatever variations and differences in emphasis, here is the kind of process which leaves the poet at once puzzled by the presence of opposites and determined never to lose hold of either at the risk of missing entirely the truth of this mutable world. One might almost think that the words of Mulcaster, Spenser's famous schoolmaster, had been burned somehow into his unconscious: "It is not a mind, not a body, that we have to educate, but a man; and we cannot divide him."<sup>1</sup> To have been able to divide him would have seemed to make the task of education easier, but it would only have falsified the situation, whose most striking characteristic is its dualism.

In the case of dualisms such as lust and love or appearance and reality—where one is to be eschewed and the other embraced—Spenser reflects in his own experience and poetry the concern of his age and seeks a means of making sure he is not taking one for the other. So omnipresent are these pairs and so difficult is it to distinguish the one from the other in each pair that if Spenser had found any simple remedy for the confusion, he would not have needed to write most of *The Faërie Queene*, where often neither protagonist nor reader can be sure, for most of the story, which is which. In other words, their disturbing similarity is just another example of human nescience. How many times through the machinations of such characters as Archimago and Duessa is appearance confused with reality, and how often is a character unable to distinguish between life-poisoning lust and life-enriching love.

For the most part the dualisms which Spenser stresses are such that many people would try to separate the two halves on the assumption that one is somehow better or truer than the other—body and soul, age and youth, pleasure and pain, the active and the contemplative, heavenly love and earthly love, heavenly beauty and earthly beauty, the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Graeco-Roman. It is a commonplace of Spenser criticism, to begin with the last pair, that the poet effects a remarkable fusion of these, a

<sup>1</sup> *Poetical Works*, p. viii.

fusion without tension, self-consciousness, or partiality. Like his disciple Milton, Spenser needs both traditions, and the two remarkably reinforce each other in his work. The flexible use of the two meanings of Pan, for example, in *The Shepheardes Calender*—as Christ and as the god of Shepherds (if this is not in itself a pun)—finds a smoother and more sophisticated expression in the sixty-eighth sonnet of the *Amoretti*, where the Easter praise of 'the Lord of lyfe' for his teaching the real meaning of love, and therefore the way his people are to love each other, culminates in a final exhortation to Spenser's beloved:

So let us loue, dear loue, lyke as we ought,  
loue is the lesson which the Lord vs taught.

Behind this couplet is the massed wisdom of the *Fowre Hymnes* with their intermingling of Platonism and Christianity plus a book of holiness which celebrates the active, warfaring life and a book of chastity which culminates in married love.

Again we may turn to the Giant of Book V for an example of a person who thinks it is possible to even out the dualisms of the world by reducing all to a dead level, who thinks it is simple thus to eliminate the false and the evil, unaware that the significant and puzzling dualisms of the world are those which cut across such simple categories as falsity and evil, even if they could be defined satisfactorily, and hence make it difficult to disentangle the strands of the real from those of the unreal. Here again it is an awareness of nescience which protects the poet from losing his hold upon dualisms or from being tricked into supposing that the world of human activity is simple and unified.

The ceaseless experience of mutability not only, therefore, insures Spenser's nescience but keeps him alert to all kinds of dualisms as building blocks of the truth. The pattern of their combination, the thong which binds them together (and here again Spenser follows his age along the pathway of creative scepticism) turns out to be the paradox, which results from the poet's refusal to abandon either half of a dualism.

Almost by its own momentum and the weight of its compon-

ents, the oscillation of dualistic thinking generates paradoxes in an attempt to formulate the truth. As a mutable world cannot be described simply by taking account of one half of each dualism, so it cannot be coped with intellectually in two-dimensional and uncomplicated terms. In deference to this need for a method to match the problem, Spenser apparently recognized that although his great epic did not have a simple and well-balanced ground plan, he had succeeded, at least by the end of the sixth book, in carrying out a very complex design, which grew under his hand—even if not all his readers were aware of it. As if in response to petulant criticism, he opens the twelfth canto of the sixth book with this stanza:

Like as a ship, that through the Ocean wyde  
 Directs her course vnto one certaine cost,  
 Is met of many a counter winde and tyde,  
 With which her winged speed is let and crost,  
 And she her selfe in stormie surges tost:  
 Yet making many a borde, and many a bay,  
 Still winneth way, ne hath her compasse lost:  
 Right so it fares with me in this long way,  
 Whose course is often stayd, yet never is astray.

There seems to be a shadowy parallel here between human nescience with respect to God's designs and the reader's suspicion that Spenser has lost his way. The master plans in the two cases (the design of the world and that of *The Faërie Queene*) are likewise parallel and consist of entwined and crossing opposites—wind and counter wind—which taken together constitute a paradox.

Many of the paradoxes, like many of the dualisms, which Spenser enunciates are peculiarly those of his own generation, but throughout the minor poems and particularly in the framework of *The Faërie Queene*, he makes use of them in a distinctive way to clarify the great truth toward which he is moving. An outstanding example of this is the series of paradoxes by which love is described, from 'Januarie' of *The Shepheardes Calender* through



the *Amoretti*. Love, as in the case of Petrarch, breeds both joy and pain, causes men to curse and bless at the same time, tastes at once of honey and gall. Says the lover to himself,

Why liuest thou stil, and yet hast thy deathes wound?

Why dyest thou still, and yet aliue art founde?

(‘December’, ll. 95-6)

The lover of the *Amoretti* beseeches his lofty, heavenward-pacing lady to look where he languishes.

Yet lowly still vouchsafe to looke on me,  
such lowlinesse shall make you lofty be.

(*Amoretti*, sonnet 13)

Again in the following sonnet Spenser utilizes the most fundamental paradox of all where love is concerned. Recommending ‘engins’ which are guaranteed to convert the proudest love, he concludes,

And if those fayle, fall downe and dy before her,  
so dying live, and living do adore her.

These conventional Renaissance paradoxes where love is concerned, like the much-used fire-ice imagery, culminate in Spenser’s description of Adonis in Book III, where the emotion has become a god.

And sooth it seemes they say: for he may not  
For euer die, and euer buried bee  
In balefull night, where all things are forgot;  
All be he subiet to mortalitie,  
Yet is eterne in mutabilitie,  
And by succession made perpetuall,  
Transformed oft, and chaunged diuerslie:  
For him the Father of all formes they call;  
Therefore needs mote he liue, that liuing giues to all.

(*FQ*, III, vi, 47)

The supreme paradox here, beyond which it is difficult to reach, is ‘etern in mutabilitie’. The eternity of love is expressed by means of and not merely in spite of its changeableness. All love’s many-

sided nature is subsumed in the phrase, and at the same time the clash of opposites generates a compounded and complex truth which moves beyond and above those very opposites. It may therefore be described as an oblique truth rather than a direct or simple one because it holds in solution, as it were, all possible dualisms born of mutability.

Spenser wisely does not attempt the impossible, that is to present the obliquity of truth straightforwardly. In keeping with its nature, he presents it ultimately by way of its opposite, the simple and direct truth. There is a certain set of mind plus the arguments congenial to it which Spenser presents again and again, always in an unfavourable light, in the hope that his readers will build up for themselves the outline of its rich opposite, the oblique truth, and appreciate the power of this opposite to come to terms with a mutable world. In each case the character portrayed by Spenser uses arguments so simple that they seem impossible to refute, the aim of which is the achievement of some short-cut to a desired end. They are direct arguments in contrast to those oblique ones which reflect the dualisms and paradoxes of a nescient individual who has, to the extent to which he can operate with paradoxes, confronted and outfaced the mutability of his world.

The arguments with which Despair belabours the Red Cross Knight, newly released from the dungeon of Pride, are so immediately plausible that the reader tends to be taken in by them along with the knight.

## 44

Then do no further goe, no further stray  
 But here lie downe, and to thy rest betake,  
 Th'ill to preuent, that life ensewen may.  
 For what hath life, that may it loued make,  
 And giues not rather cause ir to forsake?  
 Feare, sicknesse, age, losse, labour, sorrow, strife,  
 Paine, hunger, cold, that makes the hart to quake;  
 And euer fickle fortune rageth rife,  
 All which, and thousands mo do make a loathsome life.

Is not he iust, that all this doth behold  
 From highest heauen, and beares an equall eye?  
 Shall he thy sins vp in his knowledge fold,  
 And guiltie be of thine impietie?  
 Is not his law, Let euery sinner die:  
 Die shall all flesh? what then must needs be donne,  
 Is it not better to die willinglie,  
 Then linger, till the glasse be all out ronne?  
 Death is the end of woes: die soone, O faeries sonne.  
(FQ, I, ix)

In the mood generated by these snowballing arguments, the knight finds it impossible to refute them, and he would have succumbed if he had not been snatched by Una from danger. Similarly, on the Mount of Contemplation the Red Cross Knight is tempted to remain transfixed before his vision of the New Jerusalem or to seek immediate passage to it without completing his mission and abiding God's will for him.

O let me not (quoth he) then turne againe  
 Backe to the world, whose ioyes, so fruitlesse are;  
 But let me here for aye in peace remaine,  
 Or streight way on that last long voyage fare,  
 That nothing may my present hope empare.  
(FQ, I, x, 63)

The hermit prods the knight and indicates the road ahead, just as Una rescued him from suicide when he listened to Despair's arguments—which also represented direct rather than oblique truths. In similar cases, such as that of Britomart, the direct way has for its immediate goal the quiet and ease which the pilgrim feels he cannot live without, and it is the direct way which in each case he must be prevented from following if he is to save his soul.

In the second book another direct approach is proposed to Guyon by both Phaedria and Mammon, whose aim is to divert

him from his harsh mission in the world in favour of ease, safety, stability, security. Listen to Phaedria's beguiling speeches, whose flaw is that they have nothing in them of the nescient, the dualistic, or the paradoxical.

## 17

Why then dost thou, O man, that of them all  
 Art Lord, and eke of nature Souveraine,  
 Wilfully make thy selfe a wretched thrall,  
 And wast thy ioyous houres in needlesse paine,  
 Seeking for daunger and aduentures vaine?  
 What bootes it all to haue, and nothing vse?  
 Who shall him rew, that swimming in the maine,  
 Will die for thirst, and water doth refuse?  
 Refuse such fruitlesse toile, and present pleasures chuse.

## 23

Faire Sir (quoth she) be not displeased at all;  
 Who fares on sea, may not commaund his way,  
 Ne wind and weather at his pleasure call:  
 The sea is wide, and easie for to stray;  
 The wind vnstable, and doth neuer stay.  
 But here a while ye may in safety rest,  
 Till season serue new passage to assay;  
 Better safe port, then be in seas distrest.

(*FQ*, II, vi)

The temptations of Mammon are comparable in quality to those of Phaedria but of a more dark and sinister nature. Their aim, too, is to delay and beyond that to entrap the knight, and the method, as usual, is the argument direct. Mammon offers his daughter Philotime or Ambition to Guyon when the knight seems unimpressed by other treasures of the cave.

But sith thou hast found fauour in mine eye,  
 Thy spouse I will her make, if that thou lust,  
 That she may thee aduance for workes and merites iust.

(*FQ*, II, vii, 49)

The nearest Mammon comes to subtlety is to promise that his daughter will put Guyon in a position to do good works, but this is still a direct and not an oblique argument.

Later on, Paridell provides an example of a character who in spite of almost overwhelming circumstantial evidence of a direct nature that Florimell has been slain by a beast, prefers to withhold judgment, to practise Pyrrhonian *epoché*, until he has 'more certain truth'. His chief reason has its roots in mutability: God may turn even this apparently irrefutable evidence 'to good soothsay'.

Aye me (said *Paridell*) the signes be sad,  
And but God turne the same to good soothsay,  
That Ladies safetie is sore to be drad:  
Yet will I not forsake my forward way,  
Till triall doe more certaine truth bewray.

(*FQ*, III, viii, 50)

'Trial' is the important word here, as we shall see in exploring the final stage of the sceptic pattern.

What may be called the metaphysical justification of such incessant trial is the possibility—not the certainty but the chance—that God will reverse even the most overwhelmingly dark prognostications of circumstance. In Christian theology, and particularly in the Protestantism of Calvin, this possibility is given the name Grace, and thus tribute is paid to what is unknown to man in the workings of God's providence, that providence which often appears to be mere mutability. Grace, therefore, comes for Spenser to embody the highest and most powerful of paradoxes, that overwhelming and unpredictable force which arrives (in the person of Prince Arthur in *The Faërie Queene*) to rescue the protagonist from difficulties into which he has fallen because of his naïve acceptance of the surface appearance of the world for its reality and his mistaken attempts to deal with it directly rather than obliquely. The poet's use of Grace is not as mechanical and arbitrary as that of a *deus ex machina*, and one gets the feeling that its main purpose is not to extricate the

author from an impossibly tangled plot but genuinely to rescue and 'save' a protagonist with whose realistic exploits the reader has identified himself. The rescues, no matter how impossible they seem, all have the genuine feel of significant human experience. Reader and protagonist are saved together and are left wondering at the inscrutable ways of God. In one of the most heartfelt outbursts of his epic, Spenser marvels, apparently on the basis of deep personal experience, that God should surround men (who are often inimical to God) with the care of His angels out of all proportion to human desert.

## I

And is there care in heauen? and is there loue  
 In heauenly spirits to these creatures bace,  
 That may compassion of their euils moue?  
 There is: else much more wretched were the case  
 Of men, then beasts. But O th' exceeding grace  
 Of highest God, that loues his creatures so,  
 And all his workes with mercy doth embrace,  
 That blessed Angels, he sends to and fro,  
 To serue to wicked man, to serue his wicked foe.

## 2

How oft do they, their siluer bowers leaue,  
 To come to succour vs, that succour want?  
 How oft do they with golden pineons, cleaue  
 The flitting skyes, like flying Pursuiuant,  
 Against foule feends to aide vs militant?  
 They for vs fight, they watch and dewly ward,  
 And their bright squadrons round about vs plant,  
 And all for loue, and nothing for reward:  
 O why should heauenly God to men haue such regard?  
(FQ, II, viii)

With a characteristic twist of plan, Spenser in the second book allows Arthur himself, the embodiment of Grace, to be attacked by the two hags Impotence and Impatience and held down for Maleger's *coup de grâce*. Arthur is rescued only by the interven-

tion of his squire. As if to reinforce his point by presenting it in a more complicated and startling and hence paradoxical form, the poet has Grace himself standing in need of rescue—this time through the agency of his squire.

So greatest and most glorious thing on ground  
 May often need the helpe of weaker hand;  
 So feeble is mans state, and life vnsound,  
 That in assurance it may neuer stand,  
 Till it dissolued be from earthly band.  
 Proofe be thou Prince, the prowtest man aliue,  
 And noblest borne of all in *Britayne* land;  
 Yet thee fierce Fortune did so nearly driue,  
 That had not grace thee blest, thou shouldest not suruiue.  
(FQ, II, xi, 30)

Never will Spenser allow his reader to disregard the paradox at the heart of Grace—sometimes a paradox within a paradox. Mutability as exhibited on the battlefield of human experience bears an unmistakable affinity to the operation of Grace.

What man is he, that boasts of fleshly might,  
 And vaine assurance of mortality.  
 Which all so soone, as it doth come to fight,  
 Against spirituall foes, yeelds by and by,  
 Or from the field most cowardly doth fly?  
 Ne let the man ascribe it to his skill,  
 That thorough grace hath gained victory.  
 If any strength we haue, it is to ill,  
 But all the good is Gods, both power and eke will.  
(FQ, I, x, 1)

Even as extreme a statement as this is seen, in context, to be not a mere reworking of Calvinistic dogma but the paradoxical apex of Spenser's intellectual answer to the problem of mutability. From this point the answer must be translated into another medium if it is to operate effectively and endure to endless generations of men grappling with the mutability of their world. Perhaps the most memorable symbol in this area is the often puzzling one of

Fidelia in the House of Holiness with a gold cup containing water and wine but also a serpent twined within it,

That horror made to all, that did behold

But she no whit did chaunge her constant mood. . . .

(*FQ*, I, x, 13)

It is significant that by means of this symbol and of her book 'with bloud ywrit' she teaches the mysteries 'Of God, of grace, of justice, of free will . . .'. We have seen specific examples of the paradoxes inherent in grace and justice, and those in the nature of God and of free will can be readily extrapolated.

Spenser proceeding from the persistent *aperçus* of mutability to nescience and hence maintaining his hold on dualisms, which in their incandescence generate paradoxes, saw as the real and moving answer to mutability its creative transformation into a dynamic life which never ceases to embody paradox in action and so to fashion an answer to the problem of mutability out of the very material of the problem itself. This is essentially what the creative sceptics of all ages have done when they have turned to put their paradoxes, generated by the intellect, into action, in the faith that only by doing can one come to know and hence eat away at the nescience which follows mutability as its shadow. Spenser's method is essentially that which was to be followed later by his disciple Milton, who transmuted the central *donnée* of his world, the fall of man, into the glowing and recurring insight of the fortunate fall and hence turned defeat into victory—not by denying the fact of the fall but by absorbing it and extracting, like many Christians before him, its ambivalent and ever proliferating meaning.

Even the most perceptive of Spenser's critics are of little help in delineating his final answer. B. E. C. Davis thinks of the poet's philosophy of life as 'temperamental rather than intellectual' and as finding expression 'through "short swallow flights of song" that offer no final answer to the fundamental problems of existence'.<sup>1</sup> Davis, however, commends Spenser as 'a serious thinker

<sup>1</sup> *Edmund Spenser, a Critical Study* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 211.



striving earnestly, through reading and observation, to formulate a criticism of life'.<sup>1</sup> The critic working from the standpoint of creative scepticism can only point out that both 'intellectual' and 'the final answer' smack of the direct approach, which Spenser had abandoned in favour of the paradoxical, the oblique, and the on-going. Did Davis have an intimation of this when he closed his paragraph with a sentence which seems to float free? 'His ideas are tinged with the scepticism of that obscure "Atheistic" school in which his patron Raleigh appears to have played a prominent part.'<sup>2</sup> Whatever the intimations and aperçus of critics, it is in this area of formulating a criticism of life that we must seek for the capstone of the developing process which we have traced thus far in the poetry of Spenser.<sup>3</sup>

Granted that he is moving toward obliquity, spurred by the mutable which he meets at every turn and encouraged by having learned the lesson of nescience and by having beaten all his dualisms into paradoxes, how is he to portray that final goal of the oblique? We have seen him resorting, at the stage of paradoxes, to citing in *The Faërie Queene* horrible examples of the direct and simple—in the arguments of Despair, Mammon, and Phaedria and in the self-assured action of the Giant with the scales—and we have learned from that to seek as his final answer something complex, which is perhaps closer to the 'temperamental' than to the 'intellectual'. But how does a poet fashion a hymn to the oblique—by speaking out of the corner of his mouth, by orating in one direction and looking in another? Spenser has left us the mutability cantoes, to be sure, where, as Davis says, 'Mutability's case is advanced only to be rejected or explained away [the sceptic technique?]: nevertheless her defence remains as the finest and

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> References, explicit or implicit, to Spenser's scepticism may be found in D. Saurat, *Literature and Occult Tradition* (New York, 1930), J. W. Bennett, *The Evolution of The Faërie Queene* (Chicago, 1942), W. L. Renwick, *Edmund Spenser, an Essay in Renaissance Poetry* (London, 1925), W. B. C. Watkins, *Shakespeare and Spenser* (Princeton, 1950), and Edwin Greenlaw, 'Spenser and Lucretius', *Studies in Philology XVII* (1920), 439 ff.

of mutability. The action is perpetually moving forward and the actor resisting the temptation to rest in complacent dogmatism or to despair. It thus incorporates the motility of the mutable without its concomitant frustration. The frustrations, Spenser shows us, may be vanquished by forward movement guided by the light of vision, such as that which Britomart enjoys when she looks into the prophetic glass or the Red Cross Knight when he climbs the Mount of Contemplation.

The obliquity of this action prompted by love (of both God and man) is of a kind which Jesus illustrated in his story of the last judgment. Instead of Heaven's being opened to him who had planned to go there and who had what he thought were adequate road maps showing the direct route, it is almost thrust upon a very different kind of person, one who had not been thinking in terms of ultimate rewards and punishments and the way to them and who had not known that he was ministering to God but only that out of love he was relieving human suffering. The protests of those on the left of the throne are couched in terms of the direct rather than the oblique. Hadn't they followed all the rules, and therefore shouldn't the prize be theirs? What kind of a world is this? The followers of the oblique, on the other hand, enter into the joy of their Maker with a winning bewilderment whose roots are in paradox, and one expects them to spend eternity wondering, as they perhaps often did in their earthly lives, 'How could something of such magnitude and glory ever have happened to me?' Perhaps viewed from this angle, the paradox of Grace itself takes on not quite so much of the coloration of the absurd.

A tribute to the effectiveness of oblique action is paid by Calepine when he urges Matilde to tell him of her woes; even though she has abandoned all hope of relief. Says Calepine,

Oftimes it haps, that sorrows of the mynd  
Find remedie vnsought, which seeking cannot fynd.

(*FQ*, VI, iv, 28)

Chaucer's theme of gentillesse and his conviction that, as Spenser says, 'The gentle minde by gentle deeds is knowne' (*FQ*,

VI, iii, 1) is swung by Spenser into another and wider orbit when he traces to their roots in love all the exalted actions which men and women perform,

... that sweet fit that doth true beautie loue,  
And choseth vertue for his dearest Dame,  
Whence spring all noble deeds and neuer dying fame. . . .  
(FQ, III, iii, 1)

There is nothing static (and therefore neither complacent nor despairing) about the driving force of love, which impels each of Spenser's knights on his high quest and which steadies him until its completion.

Well did Antiquitie a God thee deeme,  
That ouer mortall minds hast so great might,  
To order them, as best to thee doth seeme,  
And all their actions to direct aright;  
The fatall purpose of diuine foresight,  
Thou doest effect in destined descents,  
Through deepe impression of thy secret might,  
And stirredst vp th'Heroes high intents,  
Which the late world admyres for wondrous monuments.  
(FQ, III, iii, 2)

'The fatal purpose of diuine foresight' might well be a gloss upon the predestination of Calvin. No good action takes place without love, says Spenser, and the directing power of love will have its own way in spite of the wandering and blundering of men, in other words, in spite of the world's mutability.

If *The Faërie Queene* can be called a Christian epic, it is so perhaps not in the sectarian sense, as opposed to the classical or to what has been called the pagan, but in its all-inclusiveness and its enthronement of love as the highest form of action and therefore as God Himself. In defining this kind of God, Spenser makes use of the old Sanskrit technique of those who reject every inadequate definition by replying, '*Neti, neti* (not this, not that)'. Before he rejects their ultimate implications, however (and this is perhaps the secret of his graceful incorporation of the classical

heritage), Spenser takes up their richness and variety and with a poise possible only to the nescient uses them to help him on his way to the heights of loving action. We have heard, for example, from all the Renaissance lyrists (and from Horace and Ovid before them) that in spite of the world's mutability and its downward roll toward decay, the verses of the poet will outlive 'the gilded monuments' and partake of eternity. Spenser concurs in this belief as far as it will take him and praises poetry as that form of action which stands closest to love. It is eternal in the same way as love is, yet even poetry cannot house and confine the truth he has caught sight of. Poetry can only adumbrate it and launch the poet and his readers off into the blue of their own dynamic loving where, if at all, they are to make their way toward that

... stedfast rest of all things firmly stayd  
Vpon the pillours of Eternity,  
That is contrayr to *Mutabilitie*. . .

Spenser's last word on the subject of mutability, in the spirit of his creative scepticism, is neither a formula nor an antidote but a heartening plea for vision.

... thence-forth all shall rest eternally  
With Him that is the God of Sabbaoth hight:  
O that great Sabbaoth God, graunt me that Sabaoths sight.<sup>1</sup>  
(*FQ*, VII, viii, 2)

The poet knows that the time for this eternal rest is not yet and that 'whoever would climb up some other way is a thief and a robber'. Yet it is the function of vision to re-energize the individual and return him to the quest with a sharper sense of its worth and a clearer orientation. 'Where there is no vision, the people perish.' Out of such resources Spenser is able to meet the criticism of the unloving, who mistrust love and confuse it with lust and whose basic flaw is an unacknowledged nescience with

<sup>1</sup> OED: Sabbath was often confused with Sabaoth in English, Middle High German, and medieval Latin. 'Coverdale Rom. 9:29 (1535) The Lorde of Sabbaoth [1611 Sabaoth]'.  
·45

respect to that force which is at once the instigator and the reward of high human action. Spenser can only lament, as he does at the beginning of Book IV, his 'Stoicke censours' and their haste to condemn what their frozen hearts have never experienced.

For it [love] of honor and all vertue is  
The roote, and brings forth glorious flowres of fame,  
That crown true louers with immortal blis,  
The meed of them that loue, and do not liue amiss.

3

Which who so list looke backe to former ages,  
And call to count the things that then were donne,  
Shall find, that all the workes of those wise sages,  
And braue exploits which great Heroes wonne,  
In loue were either ended or begunne . . .

(FQ, IV, Prol., 2, 3)

From the unseeing critics, who for Spenser represent *maya* because they are out of touch with loving action, he turns in adoration to 'that sacred Saint my soueraigne Queene', who truly loves and is loved and can therefore be expected to 'hearke to loue, and reade this lesson often'. In so far as the creative scepticism which Spenser exemplifies has a goal or a guiding star, it is here in the figure of the queen. She represents an imaginative projection of the fourth phase of scepticism, the doing in order to know, and thus she presents an exalted and ultimate solution, in terms of love and action, to the dilemma of mutability, which we have seen in devious ways to produce out of its own matrix the creative thinking and living which alone can surround and absorb it.

## II

### FRANCIS BACON AND A LAND UNKNOWN



THE aspects of Francis Bacon's life which he shows most conspicuously to history—his clouded political career and his sponsorship of modern science—have often obscured for later generations the depth and integrity of the thinker who, influenced almost in spite of himself by an atmosphere of intense Protestantism, expanded an instinctive undergraduate discontent with Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition into a magnificent scheme for rethinking the world. Peter Ramus, studying at Paris thirty years before Bacon was born, had also loathed Aristotle and Aristotelianism and had out of his disgust concocted a system of his own for coming at the truth, in the process converting from Catholicism to Protestantism and sealing his convictions with his life in the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Because the upshot in Bacon's case was a somewhat protean philosophical method and not a system, like that of Ramus, it has in some of its important ramifications and implications been either disregarded or misunderstood. We today, priding ourselves upon being unlike his Pharisaic Victorian critics, bypass his moral turpitude (if it was not sheer financial carelessness) and think of Bacon, for good or for ill, as father of the scientific revolution which has catapulted us into the atomic age. From this point on, our judgment of Bacon must be determined by the extent to which we have come to terms with our awesome cultural milieu.

Without presuming to delineate 'the Bacon nobody knows', it is perhaps possible to throw upon his thought a long beam of light from one unexplored direction, that of its origins (both religious and academic), and so isolate the essential components of his youthful excitement in terms of what he was reacting against in the world about him—the stultifying university learning which

Milton was also to deprecate and those religious wranglings among dogmatists (symbolized by Spenser in the Dragon of Error), who seemed to Bacon to proceed further and further from the truth with every vomited pamphlet. The repulsiveness to Bacon of many philosophic and religious elements in the Elizabethan and later in the Jacobean climate of opinion combined with gleams of promise, of a kind unrecognized by most of his fellows, to project him into an intellectual world of his own creation, one whose dimensions he had grasped intuitively when he was very young, whose shape he was clarifying to the almost unconscious accompaniment of Puritan sermons, and whose detailed map he was forever elaborating with a characteristic Renaissance awareness of 'Time's winged chariot', hoping that he could leave sufficient blazes to enable later explorers to press on and complete the work he had begun. If throughout an examination of the written record in English of this life-long enthusiasm we can remain sensitive to its convolutions and separate them out from a mass of extraneous material intended to woo the interest of the monarch or quiet the fears of the clergy, it is likely that we shall be able to understand the ways in which Bacon's projected method, designed to minister to the keenly perceived intellectual and spiritual ills of his day, is intimately connected, whether by coincidence or by divergence, with the pattern of Renaissance creative scepticism.

Critics have been arguing for three hundred years about the relationship of Bacon to Montaigne, for example, without settling the matter. Perhaps the kind of investigation we propose may cut through some of the superficialities of the argument and reveal what the two essayists have in common and at what very significant points they differ. These latter points may be the ones which mark in Bacon the beginnings of those later eighteenth-century deviations from creative scepticism which were destined to call down the wrath of men like Blake and Coleridge, who anathematized all that Bacon had come to stand for in their day—although they would gladly have joined him, had they been young men together, in that first glow of his enthusiasm for truth and for the amelioration of the condition of man.

Whoever looks closely at the origins of Bacon's dissatisfaction with the state of knowledge in his day must be prepared to come to terms with what strikes some readers as impossibly brash and presumptuous behaviour. In men whose subsequent performance has been less impressive than that of either Bacon or Milton, it would have been rank intellectual bravado to have announced that one was taking all knowledge to be one's province or that one was setting out to justify the ways of God to men. But in the case of both men the announcements represented, in a sense, the dedication of the man to what he had very early recognized to be his spiritual mission in life. We should therefore try to see all that Bacon says about his goal of truth-seeking and his qualifications for that pursuit, quite apart from his eighteenth-century persona, as pronouncements struck off in the heat of inspiration at such times as he saw clearly the beckoning hand of his true vocation.

At about the age of forty, Bacon sets down what must have represented the distillation of years of watching the way ahead of him, of having it obscured by clouds, and of again catching sight of it. He praises the inventor above politicians and heroes and then goes on to say:

'But above all, if a man could succeed, not in striking out some particular invention, however useful, but in kindling a light in nature—a light which should in its very rising touch and illuminate all the border-regions that confine upon the circle of our present knowledge; and so spreading further and further should presently disclose and bring into sight all that is most hidden and secret in the world,—that man (I thought) would be the benefactor indeed of the human race,—the propagator of man's empire over the universe, the champion of liberty, the conqueror and subduer of necessities.'<sup>1</sup>

Quite apart from what we may consider the intellectual posturing or the moral divagation of the man, Bacon, when seeing most

<sup>1</sup> Hugh G. Dick, ed., *Selected Writings of Francis Bacon* (New York [1955]), 'Of the Interpretation of Nature', pp. 150-1.



clearly, had an incandescent vision of what he hoped to do 'for the service of mankind', even for 'the good of men's souls'.<sup>1</sup> Seen in the right combination of lights, his estimate of his qualifications stands out bravely as a rallying point for all his subsequent activity—presumptuous and even absurd as this estimate may appear to those who look on Bacon condescendingly. 'For myself, I found that I was fitted for nothing so well as for the study of Truth. . . .'<sup>2</sup> Bacon would undoubtedly have repudiated at once the connection, but in many ways he shares the radical intellectual abandon and the high goals of the contemporary Protestant sect known as Seekers, of whom Roger Williams was later an outstanding example. The world had already whipped Bacon, as his contemporaries might have persecuted him had he been a Seeker, for valiantly pursuing his 'old determination' and 'seeking to be wise overmuch'. His stark answer disregards the superciliousness of his detractors and rings out in the tones of an intellectual martyr: '. . . in contemplations nothing is to be respected but Truth'.<sup>3</sup> Joan of Arc's confidence in her voices was no more solid nor more productive of insight.

Writing, at the age of thirty-one, a letter to his uncle Lord Burghley concerning court preferment, he early reflects the kind of reactions he had received from his associates. After sketching a plan for ridding his province, knowledge, of its 'rovers', he says, 'This, whether it be curiosity, or vain glory, or nature, or (if one take it favourably) *philanthropia*, is so fixed in my mind as it cannot be removed'.<sup>4</sup> Having repudiated in advance, should all his court plans go awry, the voluntary poverty of Anaxagoras, he nevertheless invokes that pre-Socratic spirit when he sketches the figure he hopes to cut in the clear-seeing eyes of posterity: 'a true pioneer in that mine of truth which (he [Anaxagoras] said) lay so deep'.<sup>5</sup> When Bacon's critics sought for precedents in an attempt to curb what looked to them like *hubris*, he answered them flatly, '. . . the thing is without precedent'.<sup>6</sup> As with Milton, the projected work was a kind 'unattempted yet in prose or rhyme'.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

Rephrasing the statement of his ambition for the 'Proem' to *The Great Instauration*, Bacon reflects the necessarily fickle state of his conception of mission—even after years of trying to carry it out—and the poles between which it swung: '... the matter at issue is either nothing or a thing so great that it may well be content with its own merit, without seeking other recompense'.<sup>1</sup> In moments of despair, he must, like all great men, have felt that perhaps he had been pursuing a chimera. In the alternating stretches of hope, however, he knew that his project was touched with the eternal. It was, he saw finally, 'that one path which is alone open to the 'human mind'.<sup>2</sup> From among many equally impressive statements of his purpose and dedication, the following from the 'Preface' to *The Great Instauration* must suffice as a more or less rounded picture of how Bacon conceived his mission.

'For my own part at least, in obedience to the everlasting love of truth, I have committed myself to the uncertainties and difficulties and solitudes of the ways and, relying on the divine assistance, have upheld my mind both against the shocks and embattled ranks of opinion, and against my own private and inward hesitations and scruples, and against the fogs and clouds of nature, and the phantoms flitting about on every side, in the hope of providing at last for the present and future generations guidance more faithful and secure.'<sup>3</sup>

What was it he had seen in the world about him which prompted, in a man to whom paradox did not come naturally, the paradoxical manifesto, 'I have committed myself to the uncertainties ...'? First of all, he had seen very little by way of practical results from men charged with responsibility for performing great works.

'The Physician pronounceth many diseases incurable, and faileth oft in the rest. The Alchemists wax old and die in hopes. The

<sup>1</sup> F. H. Anderson, ed., *Francis Bacon, The New Organon and Related Writings* (New York [1960]), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Magicians perform nothing that is permanent and profitable. The Mechanics take small light from natural philosophy, and do but spin on their own little threads.<sup>1</sup>

Such men rationalize their poor performance not by admitting their own inefficiency or inadequate methods but by striving 'against themselves) to save the credit of ignorance, and to satisfy themselves in this poverty'.<sup>2</sup> They assume the truth of certain principles and hide behind these in order to protect themselves from rigorous intellectual exploration. Their self-justification is maintained at the cost of 'the circumscription of man's power, and . . . artificial despair'.<sup>3</sup> The result is to discourage both 'the comfort of imagination' and 'the industry of trial; only upon vain glory to have their art thought perfect, and that all is impossible that is not already found'.<sup>4</sup> Instead of questioning the bases of their own dictatorship in the sciences, these men bolster their egos by 'complaints of the subtlety of nature, the hiding places of truth, the obscurity of things, the entanglement of causes, the weakness of the human mind . . .'.<sup>5</sup> Their whole defence Bacon calls 'a device for exempting ignorance from ignominy'.<sup>6</sup>

The dead weight and black despair of this situation are what Bacon in his youthful optimism has set out to attack. His predecessors in this campaign of 'advancing the boundaries of the sciences'<sup>7</sup> have not been sufficiently venturesome. They have not, as he hopes to do, 'ventured to cast themselves completely loose from received opinions or to seek their knowledge at the fountain . . .'.<sup>8</sup> Bacon's description of those who would make a small contribution to 'the existing sum of science' without disturbing its conventional outlines applies to a type of scholar in every generation who feels safe only when operating within an enclosed area, who suffers from a kind of agoraphobia of the mind and who will not therefore venture in the direction of the headwaters.

<sup>1</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, 'The Clue to the Maze', p. 393.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*', p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

John Donne, in 'Satyre III', characterizes by another figure a similar method of operation in seeking religious truth, when individuals are content to appeal to the authority of 'a Philip, or a Gregory, / A Harry, or a Martin . . .' in the belief that divine power has been delegated by God to a certain religious leader and that it is not necessary to go for it to the very source.

As streames are, Power is; those blest flowers that dwell  
At the rough streames calme head, thrive and do well,  
But having left their roots, and themselves given  
To the streames tyrannous rage, alas are driven  
Through mills, and rockes, and woods, and at last, almost  
Consum'd in going, in the sea are lost:  
So perish Soules, which more chuse mens unjust  
Power from God claym'd, than God himselfe to trust.

Trusting 'God himselfe' and seeking 'knowledge at the fountain' are congruous ways (and Bacon would say they constitute the only way) to arrive at the truth. This way involves not despair but an unbounded optimism, for it has no vested interest in ignorance.

A second and related clue to the disease from which Bacon saw the intellectual world of Elizabethan England suffering was the bad odour in which doubt and suspension of judgment were held. As a man who had committed himself to uncertainties for the sake of a greater certainty which he sensed far out beyond them, he could not brook the small-minded carping of those who were impatient of results and who could not wait until the lamp was lit before seeking the pearl of great price. Though far from maintaining, as the Academic Sceptics had, the dogma of doubt and eternal *epoché* or suspension of judgment, Bacon nevertheless recognized that unless these techniques were used, of course judiciously, man had no hope of ever coming within sight of the truth. Looking at the world about him, he saw that to suppose one's mind a perfect instrument was to prevent its ever becoming that. As Bacon was to show, the purified mind, cleansed of its idols, is a marvellous instrument for truth-seeking, but consider-

able time must elapse before one can move on from 'experiments of light' (undertaken in order to sharpen the mind) to 'experiments of fruit' (undertaken to produce practical results).

Bacon is fond of pointing to the creative method of God Himself, who on the first day decreed only light and spent subsequent days in creating the heavens, the waters, and the earth and still later in peopling the world with creatures. In contrast with this procedure Bacon saw natural philosophers hurrying to abstract primary notions from insufficient facts in order that they might immediately set their feet on terra firma. He rejects utterly 'all that premature human reasoning which anticipates inquiry, and is abstracted from the facts rashly and sooner than is fit . . .'.<sup>1</sup> The timing of one's thought is extremely important to Bacon, and he never misses an opportunity to condemn 'that unseasonable and puerile hurry to snatch by way of earnest at the first works which come within reach'.<sup>2</sup> In order to encourage his readers to hold their fire through what may be the tedious collection of the materials for a natural history, Bacon proposes to indicate now and then 'glances of history toward philosophy, both by way of an assurance to men that they will not be kept forever tossing on the waves of experience, and also that when the time comes for the intellect to begin its work, it may find everything the more ready'.<sup>3</sup> The investigator must learn to follow the lead of nature and to await the operation of the seasons.

'For though it be true that I am principally in pursuit of works and the active department of the sciences, yet I wait for harvest-time and do not attempt to mow the moss or to reap the green corn.'<sup>4</sup>

His most pointed and perceptive answer to those who would condemn doubt and suspension of judgment comes near the end of his 'Plan of *The Great Instauration*':

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The Plan of *The Great Instauration*', p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

'For besides that I hope my speculations may, in virtue of my continual conversancy with nature, have a value beyond the pretensions of my wit, they will serve in the meantime for wayside inns, in which the mind may rest and refresh itself on its journey to more certain conclusions. Nevertheless I wish it to be understood in the meantime that they are conclusions by which (as not being discovered and proved by the true form of interpretation) I do not at all mean to bind myself. Nor need any one be alarmed at such suspension of judgment in one who maintains not simply that nothing can be known, but only that nothing can be known except in a certain course and way; and yet establishes provisionally certain degrees of assurance for use and relief until the mind shall arrive at a knowledge of causes in which it can rest.'<sup>1</sup>

This answer to the condemners of doubt embodies important elements of Bacon's method which must not be overlooked: the conception of his speculations as 'wayside inns' of the mind, not permanent dwelling places, the conviction that 'nothing can be known except in a certain course and way', and hence the positing of progressive degrees of assurance until the mind reaches its far-off resting place in a 'knowledge of causes'. 'The Plan' sweeps to its conclusion in a moving vision of this ultimate goal and a sobering prayer for its attainment:

'Thou when thou turnedst to look upon the works which thy hands had made, sawest that all was very good, and didst rest from thy labours. But man, when he turned to look upon the work which his hands had made, saw that all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and could find no rest therein. Wherefore, if we labour in thy works with the sweat of our brows, thou wilt make us partakers of thy vision and thy sabbath. Humbly we pray that this mind may be steadfast in us, and that through these our hands; and the hands of others to whom thou shalt give the same spirit, thou wilt vouchsafe to endow the human family with new mercies.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

university experience, which had taught him that 'the succession is between master and disciple, and not between inventor and continuer or advancer . . .'.<sup>1</sup> What scholar in his day would have dared to proceed beyond the dicta of his master, even if that master had been the Stagirite, who himself, ironically, 'came with a professed contradiction to all the world, and did put all his opinions upon his own authority and argument, and never so much as nameth an author but to confute and reprove him . . .'.<sup>2</sup> Bacon likens philosophy in this state of affairs to a statue 'worshipped and celebrated, but not moved or advanced'.<sup>3</sup> He sees clearly and delineates sharply the process whereby disciples, following the line of least resistance, relinquish their intellectual initiative and are content to make over to a master their rights of further inquiry, 'of which they are weary and impatient'.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Bacon saw among his contemporaries a very different kind of philosopher, ruthless in tearing down what seemed to him indefensible positions but whose aim turned out to be not the advancement of learning but merely the substitution of his own set of opinions for those of his opponent. The aim of such thinkers has been 'only to change doctrines and transfer the kingdom of opinions to themselves'.<sup>5</sup> The distinction between this kind of operation and that of the genuine scientist is that the latter is bent upon giving 'light to other men's minds' rather than 'luster to his own name'.<sup>6</sup> Bacon would propose a scheme which 'seeks for the sciences not arrogantly in the little cells of human wit, but with reverence in the greater world'.<sup>7</sup> Everywhere Bacon opposes setting up 'mimic and fabulous worlds' of one's own invention or taking 'a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world . . .'.<sup>8</sup> Neither of these will help us to trace the footsteps of the Creator across His world. They will only obscure his prints and at the same time wrap us in the false if warm security of our own dogmatism.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 400.<sup>3</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*', p. 8.<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The Plan of *The Great Instauration*', p. 29.

Much of Bacon's disparagement of the ancients centres about his observation that over the centuries those who followed masters did even that imperfectly, taking from them only what seemed to require the least effort to perpetuate. As a result much of the solid truth of the world has been lost for want of disciples as venturesome and far-seeing as their mentors. To venerate merely what had come down to us is, therefore, to be satisfied with flotsam and jetsam, buoyant because rotten, not with the solid goods, most of which have settled to the river bed.

'So that time seemeth to be of the nature of a river or flood, that bringeth down to us that which is light and blown up, and sinketh and drowneth that which is solid and grave.'<sup>1</sup>

What Bacon hoped to salvage as a basis for further operations was the wisdom of Anaxagoras, Democritus and other pre-Socratics which the Aristotelian wave had engulfed.

What precisely does Bacon object to in the sciences of his day? As usual, he chooses a figure to adumbrate his answer and goes on from there to fill in the details. He disapproves of those scientists who, like the spider, indulge in 'frivolous disputations, confutations, and verborities',<sup>2</sup> and also those who, like the ant, busy but ignorant, are involved in 'blind experiments and auricular traditions and impostures'.<sup>3</sup> Between these two groups he proposes the ideal figure of the bee, who collects material from varied sources and transforms it into useful products—'industrious observations, grounded conclusions, and profitable inventions and discoveries'.<sup>4</sup> With 'that knowledge whose dignity is maintained by works of utility and power' he contrasts 'that fair-weather learning which is nursed by leisure, blossoms under reward and praise, which cannot withstand the shock of opinion,

<sup>1</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, 'The Clue to the Maze', p. 401.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Letter to Burghley', p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



and is liable to be abused by tricks and quackery'.<sup>1</sup> Again it is the frailty and lack of stamina in contemporary learning which he berates, along with its static quality. '... in what is now done in the matter of science there is only a whirling round about, and perpetual agitation, ending where it began.'<sup>2</sup> Those Greeks whom men have been following were childlike in being able to talk but not to generate—'fruitful of controversies but barren of works'.<sup>3</sup> The aim should not be 'to overcome an opponent in argument' (and so to wax more dogmatic) but 'to command nature in action'.<sup>4</sup> Such a goal is not achievable under present conditions, Bacon says.

'For first, the information of the sense itself, sometimes failing, sometimes false; observation, careless, irregular, and led by chance; tradition, vain, and fed on rumour; practice, slavishly bent upon its work; experiment, blind, stupid, vague, and prematurely broken off; lastly, natural history trivial and poor—all these have contributed to supply the understanding with very bad materials for philosophy and the sciences.'<sup>5</sup>

The result has been an almost fatal divorce between the rational and the empirical faculties, whereby neither has been able to operate effectively. Bacon's admonition at the end of his 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*' reflects the false ideals of his contemporaries which he was trying almost single-handedly to eradicate.

'Lastly, I would address one general admonition to all—that they consider what are the true ends of knowledge, and that they seek it not either for pleasure of the mind, or for contention, or for superiority to others, or for profit, or fame, or power, or any of

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Of the Interpretation of Nature', p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, 'Proem to *The Great Instauration*', p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*', p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The Plan of *The Great Instauration*', p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

these inferior things, but for the benefit and use of life, and that they perfect and govern it in charity.<sup>1</sup>

Bacon pursues Aristotle and his malign influence not only across Renaissance philosophy but into the sphere of Renaissance Christianity, where the resulting confusion of philosophy and religion constitutes his fifth charge against his age. The incorporation of 'the contentious philosophy of Aristotle into the body of Christian religion'<sup>2</sup> has resulted, says Bacon, in both superstitious philosophy and heretical religion. The result has been opposition on the part of the Church to scientific investigation lest God's glory be diminished, followed by a ruinous misinterpretation of the Fall in order to support this opposition. (The command of God did not interdict knowledge of nature, as when Adam named the animals, but only knowledge of good and evil with its consequent inflation of the mind.) The guardians of theology have too often tried 'either out of mere ignorance, or out of an excess of devotion, to have divinity all in all, whereas it should be only above all . . .'.<sup>3</sup> They have, like Job's friends, offered 'to tell a lie for God's cause'<sup>4</sup> and so have obscured the issue, have stood in the light, and thus created a lengthening shadow between man and God.

As another example of this unlawful cohabitation of religion and philosophy Bacon, in *The New Organon*, cites the founding of 'a system of natural philosophy on the first chapter of Genesis, on the book of Job, and other parts of the sacred writings, seeking for the dead among the living'.<sup>5</sup> The virtue of 'the sacred writings' was that at least they did not embody inert and impotent systems and were consequently alive, no matter how dead their interpreters.

Bacon's fervent prayer, embodying both humility and charity, at once reflects the situation around him and recalls the teasing

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*', p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, 'The Clue to the Maze', p. 397.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 399.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism LXV, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 400.

inscrutability of Jesus' answer to His disciples concerning tribute to Caesar.

'This likewise I humbly pray, that human things may not interfere with things divine, and that from the opening of the ways of sense and the increase of natural light there may arise in our minds no incredulity or darkness with regard to the divine mysteries, but rather that the understanding being thereby purified and purged of fancies and vanity, and yet not the less subject and entirely submissive to the divine oracles, may give to faith that which is faith's. Lastly, that knowledge being now discharged of that venom which the serpent infused into it, and which makes the mind of man to swell, we may not be wise above measure and sobriety, but cultivate truth in charity.'<sup>1</sup>

Bacon's insistence at many points on cultivating truth in charity exposes the uncharitable bickering and the rigid dogmatisms, many of them stemming from the sterile marriage of religion and philosophy, which met him on every hand and were effectively preventing the advancement of learning to which he had dedicated his life.

Of all these charges of Bacon's against his age, it is the one last named, the illegitimate liaison of philosophy and religion, which most readily lends itself to interpretations of cynicism. When as an antidote he commends again and again, following Chrysostom, maintaining a fundamental distinction between the book of God's word and the book of God's works, his readers may easily suspect that he holds in slight esteem the word of God, paying it only lip service in order to pass swiftly on to the really serious business of life, which is with God's works. Sufficient evidence is at hand in the form of damaging statements to justify this position. But like many of the scientific theories to which Bacon objected, these imputations lead to nothing but a dead end.

Another interpretation is possible, one which has to recommend it great power to illuminate the puzzling course of Bacon's

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*', pp. 14-15.

these inferior things, but for the benefit and use of life, and that they perfect and govern it in charity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*', p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, 'The Clue to the Maze', p. 397.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 399.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism LXV, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 400.

evolving language of his own out-thrusts toward the truth as he contemplated in complete freedom the book of God's works. Thus one might compile all that Bacon says about separating word and works into a kind of lesser 'Areopagitica' in praise of intellectual freedom, whose advocacy both Milton and Bacon combined with an unquenchable faith in the triumph of truth.

One can cite in justification of Bacon's unique approach to the two books of God's word and God's works his successful blending not only of Biblical style but of direct and indirect quotations from the Old and New Testaments (always employed in his own inimitable way) with what appears to be the central axiom of his thought: that man will have reached the truth only when he can see clearly and directly the great world of natural facts, whatever blocks his way having been ruthlessly pushed aside. Among these impediments are the five faults for which Bacon condemns his age (cf. *supra*, pp. 51-61) as well as the four idols of the mind itself, which we shall consider in detail later.

He makes few references to the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians,<sup>1</sup> but its force is so pervasive that one could almost believe it was never long out of his mind.

'For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away. . . . For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known.'

I Cor. 13:9-10, 12

The 'enchanted glass' which so fascinates Bacon as a symbol of man's unpurified and unredeemed mind must owe something to these famous words of Paul, as his persistent calling for charity in a world of bickering sects, both philosophic and religious, owes much to the rest of the chapter. There is a strongly Protestant flavour about both his apotheosis of the facts of nature and the desperate pushing through to direct experience of them without

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, pp. 162, 385.

intellectual life. This interpretation consists of two parts. First, he thought he could smooth the way for his own method of truth-seeking, which would obviously have to reject dogmatisms and advocate doubt and suspension of judgment as techniques, if he made it clear at the outset that he was operating with natural phenomena rather than with inspired scripture. Second, he would thus be free to use whatever he found valuable in the book of God's word (and among its expositors) in order to adumbrate his own method, which was not at all divorced from the wisdom of scripture but which he did not want to encumber with those portions or interpretations of the word which he could not make use of. Thomas Jefferson much later in America made, perhaps in a similar spirit, his own selection from the New Testament of passages which reinforced his deism. Both men, but Bacon more notably than Jefferson, exemplify the sceptic process of making use of no more than one can assimilate and leaving the rest in limbo.

Bacon recognized that in an unscientific age, where most of men's dialectical energies were expended (and wasted he felt) in religious controversy, he could obtain for his cogitations an area of quiet and for their promulgation a less obstructed highway if he openly disavowed any connection between what he was doing and what was being done by the religious controversialists of his day. The method he was advocating, as we shall see, had significant implications for religious as well as scientific thinking, but Bacon's strategy was to divide the two sharply at the very beginning and keep them apart—not because he wanted to bifurcate his world but because he wanted to protect what seemed to him its most precious elements from being ravaged in the heat of useless, truth-obscuring controversy. One can perhaps imagine him as a young man listening with his learned and intense mother to famous dissenting preachers and being caught up in their fire, which blended with another kind of fire within him, that of the truth-seeker, and taking over not only the cadences of the scripture they read, but translating much of its wisdom (and whatever satisfaction he could glean from their hermeneutics) into the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, pp. 162, 385.



the cramping mediation of sect or priest or sacrament. Bacon's method thus constitutes the blueprint of a kind of secularism seen from its most attractive side, not as a way of life in opposition to the religious but as an approach to the divine which treats nature with an almost religious veneration as the repository of God's truth, where one can confront it without the disabilities which in every age cluster around the interpretation of God's word.

Let us look in detail, first, at the way in which Bacon proposes to dwell 'purely and constantly among the facts of nature'<sup>1</sup> in the midst of what he vividly refers to as 'the very bowels of nature'.<sup>2</sup> No devotee of any religion ever submitted himself more wholeheartedly to his god than Bacon does to 'things as they are'<sup>3</sup> in search of 'the true relation between the nature of things and the nature of the mind'.<sup>4</sup> The establishing of this relationship constitutes what he calls 'the strewing and decoration of the bridal chamber of the mind and the universe',<sup>5</sup> which corresponds to the 'experiments of light' designed to precede those 'experiments of truth' whose function is to 'subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity'.<sup>6</sup> Bacon proposes to move from the outer courts of nature, which many have trodden, into her inner chambers. We see his intellectual humility in operation when we observe him attributing to nature the same absolute sovereignty as that with which the Calvinist invests his God.

'For man is but the servant and interpreter of nature: what he does and what he knows is only what he has observed of nature's order in fact or in thought; beyond this he knows nothing and can do nothing. For the chain of causes cannot by any force be loosed or broken, nor can nature be commanded except by being obeyed.'<sup>7</sup>

In a more paradoxical author than Bacon, this latter statement

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, ed., *op. cit.*, 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*', p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The Plan of *The Great Instauration*', p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism CXXIX, p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The Plan of *The Great Instauration*', p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

would bristle with subtleties. Here it seems to imply unequivocal obedience to, because conformity with, the nature of things as the price of effective action.

As we have seen, Bacon charges the Greek philosophers (chiefly Aristotle) and their followers with having employed a logic 'not nearly subtle enough to deal with nature'.<sup>1</sup> As a result the notions of the mind have been 'improperly and overhastily abstracted from facts'.<sup>2</sup> The induction which he proposes will have as its goal to come to grips, to close with nature. His *Great Instauration* 'seeks for the sciences not arrogantly in the little cells of human wit, but with reverence in the greater world'.<sup>3</sup> Bacon charges Aristotle, among other things, with coming too swiftly to rigid conclusions and hence reducing his subsequent experience to slavery—an operation which might be characterized as a kind of intellectual blasphemy in view of Bacon's exalted conception of nature. Aristotle and his like, according to Bacon, have been so eager to provide answers to questions, to 'affirm something positive in words'<sup>4</sup> (and so demonstrate their own wisdom) that they have lost sight of their original purpose, which was to investigate 'the inner truth of things', no matter where such investigation might lead them. As if he were reassuring his readers that 'the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord' or that the Atman and the Brahman are essentially one, Bacon hails Solomon for 'declaring not obscurely that God hath framed the mind of man as a mirror or glass capable of the image of the universal world, and joyful to receive the impression thereof, as the eye joyeth to receive light'.<sup>5</sup> The performance of this function and not the jerry-building of the hasty and opinionated system-maker is the true vocation of thinking man. In *The New Organon* Bacon says, 'I am building in the human understanding a true model of the world such as it is in fact, not such as a man's own reason would have it to be'.<sup>6</sup> What he is agonizing over in the aphorisms is the task

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*', p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism LXIII, p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, pp. 161-2.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism CXXIV, p. 113.

of 'rendering the human understanding a match for things and nature'.<sup>1</sup> One can almost hear Bacon intoning majestically his reverence for things and nature: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'. Here the price of idolatry is missing completely the truth contained in the 'volume of creation'.

Had it not been for the secondary effects of the Fall, the mirror of man's mind would naturally and joyfully (as well as accurately) reflect the 'greater world' in which truth resides; but in his intellectually fallen condition man slips easily into the way of the schoolmen, who 'left the oracle of God's works and adored the deceiving and deformed images which the unequal mirror of their own minds or a few received authors or principles did represent unto them'.<sup>2</sup> When Bacon attributes to the Fall itself this propensity of man to intellectual sin, the reader often wonders whether he means to be taken literally or figuratively, and the same question arises in *The Wisdom of the Ancients*. Because Bacon believes that man's mind in its prelapsarian state was created to reflect the truth of God's works and that 'the truth of being and the truth of knowing are one, differing no more than the direct beam and the beam reflected',<sup>3</sup> he affirms that something is even yet built into the very process of knowing which, if allowed to operate directly upon the facts of nature, prevents man's going astray. The mind 'worketh according to the stuff, and is limited thereby',<sup>4</sup> whereas working upon itself, like the spider it brings forth fine spun and beautifully patterned cobwebs 'of no substance or profit'. Lest he be unfair to these cobweb-spinning authors and their loyal disciples, Bacon asks that they be given their due but also that time, 'which is the author of authors be not deprived of his due, which is further and further to discover truth'.<sup>5</sup> As this inevitable process rolls on, authors must expect to be expendable in so far as they have not reflected accurately but have diverted or obscured the direct beam of truth.

In view of this central belief in the power of man's purified

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, II, Aphorism XIX, p. 155.

<sup>2</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 188-9.

mind to reflect the truth in nature, it is easy to understand the important place which Bacon gave to natural history in his method. In setting forth the purpose of his own *Historia Naturalis*, he reaches another of those Pisgahs from which he is able to survey the whole of his method and its purposes.

'If therefore,' continues Bacon, 'there be any humility towards the Creator, and reverence for and magnifying of his works, and charity towards men and endeavour to alleviate their necessities and tribulations; if there be any love of truth, hatred of darkness, and desire for purification of the understanding; men must be implored again and again (having quit or at least set aside for a little while those hasty and preposterous philosophies which have preferred theses to hypotheses, led experience captive, and triumphed over the works of God) to draw near with reverence and humility in order to unroll the volume of creation, to linger and reflect upon it, and, washed clean from prejudices, to meditate on it disinterestedly and with integrity."<sup>1</sup>

So much for what Bacon advocates doing with the book of God's works and how he expects reverently to draw truth out of it, transforming the truth of being into the truth of knowing.

In the process of trying to quiet the fears of his readers and imbue them with an enthusiasm for writing 'an apocalypse or true vision of the footsteps of the Creator imprinted on his creatures'.<sup>2</sup> Bacon makes use, as we have indicated above (p. 61-2), of whatever he can lay his hands on in order to achieve his ends, believing with all his soul in their sanctity. One notable example is the use he makes of Jesus' words to the Sadducees who asked Him about the marital status in the resurrection of the woman of who married successively seven brothers. Jesus, seeking apparently to impress His interrogators with the utter irrelevancy their question, said, 'You do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, *The Philosophy . . .*, p. 271.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, "The Plan of *The Great Instauration*", p. 29.

power of God'.<sup>1</sup> To a mind seeking support in scripture as well as elsewhere for the separation of word from works, this passage offers just what Bacon needs in that it teaches 'that there are but two fountains of heresy, not knowing the will of God revealed in the Scriptures, and not knowing the power of God revealed or at least made most sensible in his creatures'.<sup>2</sup> Whether this way of interpreting scripture, among the many others which were to proliferate in the seventeenth century, is valid need not concern us here. What is important is the light it throws upon Bacon and the way his mind operates with respect to the sphere of religion, where he has been accused alternately of disbelief and of hypocrisy. Bacon called the above scriptural quotation 'that first canon against heresies . . . for both it freeth the mind from a number of weak fancies and imaginations, and it raiseth the mind to acknowledge that to God all things are possible'.<sup>3</sup>

As Bacon was bent on treating the book of God's works separately from the book of God's word in order to avoid the pitfalls attendant upon confusing them and thereby clarify his vision of what man could know and do, so as we have seen, he was willing to make use of whatever in scripture or in the aura which hung about the Christian religion could be applied to the method which to him was the most sacred and awe-inspiring fact of his existence, leading as it did to the very throne of truth. In trying, for example, to explain how it will be necessary for men not only to acquire knowledge directly through sense experience but also through sense experiments which themselves need to be interpreted, Bacon designates himself 'a true priest of the sense . . . and a not unskillful interpreter of its oracles'.<sup>4</sup> Replying to Pliny's apology for introducing 'things that are mean or even filthy' into natural history, Bacon says that the sun is not polluted by the sewer.

'As for myself, I am not raising a capitol or pyramid to the pride

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 22:29.

<sup>2</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, 'The Clue to the Maze', p. 399.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Anderson ed., 'The Plan of *The Great Instauration*', p. 22.

of man, but laying a foundation in the human understanding for a holy temple after the model of the world. That model therefore I follow. For whatever deserves to exist deserves also to be known, for knowledge is the image of existence; and the things mean and splendid exist alike.<sup>1</sup>

'A holy temple after the model of the world' is more than just a figurative rendering of Bacon's aspirations. It takes on whatever connotations the reader habitually associates with the words 'a holy temple', and so he is lifted toward the plane of intellectual awe and excitement where Bacon dwells. To him the routine keeping of records on one's experiments, if seen under the eye of eternity, becomes a sacred task. As George Herbert was to write,

Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws  
Makes that and th' action fine.

'... all statements of observation and experiment are to be written in truth and with religious care, as if the writer were under oath and devoid of reservation of doubt and question. The record is the book of God's works and—so far as there may be an analogy between the majesty of divine things and the humbleness of earthly things—is a kind of second Scripture.'<sup>2</sup>

Again this is an example of positive secularism at its best. The whole creation and one's investigation of it are raised to sacred heights. Such investigation 'will discover those universal natures from whose combinations, even as a language is composed of letters, all things in the created universe, which bear the Creator's stamp, are composed'.<sup>3</sup> In *The Advancement* he had diagrammed the pyramid of knowledge as consisting of natural history at the base, above that physic, and at the top metaphysic, to which he is not sure man can attain.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism CXX, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *The Philosophy*. . . , p. 264.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

'But these three be the true *stages* of knowledge; and are to them that are depraved no better than the giants' hills, [Pelion, Ossa, and Olympus, piled upon each other,]

Ter sunt conati imponere Pelio Ossam,

Scilicet atque Ossae frondosum involvere Olympum:

but to those which refer all things to the glory of God, they are as the three acclamations, *Sancte, sancte, sancte*; holy in the description or dilatation of his works, holy in the connexion or concatenation of them, and holy in the union of them in a perpetual and uniform law.<sup>1</sup>

To Christian readers, who knew at first hand the experience of purging the soul, who were living within memory of the dissolution of the monasteries, and who appreciated the necessity as well as the excesses of iconoclasm, it was shrewd of Bacon to speak of dismissing idols and of the expiations and purgings of the mind.

But there are even subtler similarities between religion and what Bacon is trying to do. He recognizes, like every Renaissance thinker with an aristocratic bent, that no matter how carefully 'great and excellent wits' may elaborate their insights into truth, only those truths will survive in popular memory which appeal to either the common sense or the imagination of the multitude—'not such knowledge as is digged out of the hard mine of history and experience, and falleth out to be in some points as adverse to common sense or popular reason, as religion, or more.'<sup>2</sup> Unless this knowledge is presented effectively 'with eloquence and power', it 'may be likely to appear and disclose a little world and straight to vanish and shut again'.<sup>3</sup> Once more in *The New Organon*, Bacon is trying to distinguish between what he calls anticipations and interpretations. The former are the result of rushing too quickly into a generalization on the basis of a few inadequately digested facts; interpretations, on the other hand, are the result of following Bacon's method of induction and, 'being

<sup>1</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The Clue to the Maze', p. 401.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

gathered here and there from very various and widely dispersed facts, cannot suddenly strike the understanding; and therefore they must needs, in respect of the opinions of the time, seem harsh and out of tune, much as the mysteries of faith do.<sup>1</sup> It is extremely significant that Bacon should conceive of these 'interpretations' as characterized by the same kind of complexity and subtlety as 'the mysteries of faith', for this implies an often unguessed respect for and understanding of religious truths. The reader may also miss the fact that Bacon here exalts religious truths by setting them alongside what we know to be dearest to his heart, the insights into truth which emerge from his inductive method of probing into the nature of things. Statements such as these help to build up for the present-day reader a rich conception of Bacon's secularism, and therefore he is not appalled to find that Bacon's 'kingdom of man, founded on the sciences' demands for entrance the same kind of humility and the same cleansed and freed understanding as does 'the kingdom of heaven'.

'So much concerning the several classes of Idols and their equipage; all of which must be renounced and put away with a fixed and solemn determination, and the understanding thoroughly freed and cleansed; the entrance into the kingdom of man, founded on the sciences, being not much other than the entrance into the kingdom of heaven, whereinto none may enter except as a little child.'<sup>2</sup>

One wonders whether there is in fact any difference at all and whether the same set of mind would not operate quite as effectively in either kingdom. If so, Bacon has really set forth a plan for reconciling the two as he moves on toward the goal of truth-seeking.

Years before, in *The Advancement of Learning*, where we see Bacon thinking through many of the ideas which are later encapsulated in *The New Organon*, he had used the story of Samuel

<sup>1</sup> Anderson ed., *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism XXVIII, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, I, Aphorism LXVIII, p. 66.



as a judge seeking for a new King of Israel and almost missing David, the youngest and least prepossessing of Jesse's sons, because David was working in the field. This Bacon cited as an example of how easy it is to consider only what appears on the affirmative side of a proposition and never what is on the negative and of the headlong haste with which people rush to their 'theories and dogmaticals' to 'make room for their opinions'.

'Certainly it is a thing may touch a man with religious wonder, to see how the footsteps of deducement are the very same in divine and human truth: for as in divine truth man cannot endure to become as a child; so in human, they reputed the attending the Inductions (whereof we speak) as if they were a second infancy or childhood.'<sup>1</sup>

One hears echoes of *The Praise of Folly* and of Paul's question, 'hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?'<sup>2</sup> Against this background the use which Bacon makes of Lucretius in his essay 'Of Truth' takes on a new significance.

*'... no pleasure is comparable to the standing upon the vantage ground of Truth (a hill not to be commanded, and where the air is always clear and serene), and to see the errors, and wanderings, and mists, and tempests, in the vale below; so always that this prospect be with pity, and not with swelling or pride. Certainly, it is heaven upon earth, to have a man's mind move in charity, rest in providence, and turn upon the poles of truth.'*<sup>3</sup>

We cannot think that these were the sentiments of a man who had permanently divided truth into two separate and non-communicating kingdoms. Bacon saw the similarities between the book of God's word and the book of God's works and treated one as reverently as the other. It was in defence of what he revered in nature that he proscribed what he saw to be men's illegitimate and unfruitful confusion between the two.

<sup>1</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 1:20.

<sup>3</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, p. 8.

At this point it is necessary to stop and ask ourselves not precisely what was Bacon's method of discovering or uncovering the truth which lay in the bosom of nature awaiting exantlation, but rather, and particularly, how this method relates to creative scepticism and what we can learn about this method from comparing the two. At what points do they coincide, and where are they far apart? Perhaps such scrutiny will help to uncover some of the reasons why Bacon, since he has been held responsible for people like Locke and Newton, was anathema to the Romanticists and is today often saddled with having fathered the atomic age, which could possibly destroy completely the book of God's works.

In pursuit of this goal, let us see what we can glean from Bacon's own references to Greek and Renaissance scepticism, which he is most often bent on distinguishing from his own inductive method. He clearsightedly recognizes the great temptation that always exists for thinkers to build up an exaggerated notion of the obscurity of things, and consequently a low opinion of man's ability to know, out of their own failure to break through to the nature of things. They try to save face by making their continued ignorance the cornerstone of their systems.<sup>1</sup> Bacon puts into the same camp (that of those who could establish and perpetuate idols) the dogmatic scientists and 'those who deny that we can know anything'.<sup>2</sup> (Indeed, he sees elements of both attitudes in Aristotle himself.) The result of such nescience Bacon sees to be 'a wandering kind of inquiry that leads to nothing'.<sup>3</sup> He goes on to back up his contention by citing the example of the New Academy, which made a dogma of the Platonic acatalepsi directed 'at first in jest and irony' against the older sophists, 'who were of nothing else so much ashamed as of seeming to doubt about anything'.<sup>4</sup> The distinction which Bacon then makes is significant and indicates that if he had had to choose one dogma as against another, he would pick the New Academics over more arbitrary dogmatists.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Anderson ed., 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*', p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism LXVII, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

'And though theirs [the New Academics'] is a fairer seeming way than arbitrary decisions, since they say that they by no means destroy all investigation, like Pyrrho and his Refrainers, but allow of some things to be followed as probable, though of none to be maintained as true; yet still when the human mind has once despaired of finding truth, its interest in all things grows fainter, and the result is that men turn aside to pleasant disputations and discourses and roam as it were from object to object, rather than keep on a course of severe inquisition.'<sup>1</sup>

To Bacon it is intellectually irresponsible to 'turn aside to pleasant disputations and discourses', and hearing this the reader thinks he feels on his neck the hot wind of Puritanism.

Similarly, when Bacon in *The Wisdom of the Ancients* expatiates on the Sphinx, who represents practice as the Muses represent contemplation, he regrets lingering with the Muses and urges getting on to the Sphinx, where one has solid work to show for his efforts. But the riddles must be answered satisfactorily and then put behind one as he strips for action.

'... so long as the object of meditation and inquiry is merely to know, the understanding is not oppressed or straitened by it, but is free to wander and expatiate, and finds in the very uncertainty of conclusion and variety of choice a certain pleasure and delight. . . .'<sup>2</sup>

Bacon must have known this kind of pleasure, but now he had put away childish things. Strangely enough, his assertion that man's despair of finding truth saps his intellectual interests resembles the argument that if predestination is accepted as a fact, no one will ever strive to do what is right since the die, for salvation or for damnation, is already cast. History has demonstrated that, ironically, believers in predestination are the most active of men, and it is equally unlikely that acatalepsia or nescience dims

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, p. 419.

one's interest in all things. Neither the members of the New Academy nor Montaigne, to be sure, were pursuing the same course of investigation as Bacon, but they cannot be said to have maintained an indifference to the world in any way comparable to that of Pyrrho's famous shipboard hog.

Behind all that Bacon has to say about the dangers of acatalepsia is the fear that men will fall victim to 'dogmas not only despaired of but dedicated to despair'.<sup>1</sup> It is thus Bacon's essential optimism rather than his logic which will not allow him to accept man's nescience in the same way the sceptics do. He recommends rather 'the tenable position maintained by the more ancient of the Greeks between a boastful pronouncing on everything and a despair of knowing anything'.<sup>2</sup>

The use Bacon makes of scepticism and the way in which he builds it into his own method of induction indicate to some extent the differences between the two.

'It is bad for men to think their knowledge perfect and yet know nothing which they ought; it is good, and well concluded, that men should think their knowledge imperfect and yet have discovered and invented the means to know what is necessary.'<sup>3</sup>

Here again Bacon ends on an optimistic note. In *The Advancement of Learning*, after charging that many Roman orators in Cicero's day adopted scepticism 'as that which was fitted to give glory to their eloquence and variable discourses; being rather like progresses of pleasure than journeys to an end',<sup>4</sup> Bacon admits that 'assuredly many scattered in both Academies did hold it in subtilty and integrity'.<sup>5</sup> However, their chief error was their distrust of the senses, says Bacon, when they should rather have exposed '*the weakness of the intellectual powers, and . . . the manner of collecting and concluding upon the reports of the senses*'.<sup>6</sup> Stressing his own optimism again, Bacon goes on to reassure his readers,

<sup>1</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism I.XXV, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *The Philosophy . . .*, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 290.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

'This I speak not to disable the mind of man, but to stir it up to seek help: for no man, be he never so cunning or practised, can make a straight line or perfect circle by steadiness of hand, which may be easily done by help of a ruler or compass.'<sup>1</sup>

This retort has something of the pragmatic quality of Doctor Johnson's kicking the pebble out of his path in order to refute the doctrine of determinism, and a line drawn from one to the other might reveal some unguessed connections. Much of Bacon's leaning toward scepticism as well as his fundamental mistrust of it as a guide toward the truth may be seen in Aphorism CXXVI of *The New Organon*.

'It will also be thought that by forbidding men to pronounce and to set down principles as established until they have duly arrived through the intermediate steps at the highest generalities, I maintain a sort of suspension of the judgment, and bring it to what the Greeks call *Acatalepsia*—a denial of the capacity of the mind to comprehend truth. But in reality that which I meditate and propound is not *Acatalepsia*, but *Eucatalepsia*; not denial of the capacity to understand, but provision for understanding truly. For I do not take away authority from the senses, but supply them with helps; I do not slight the understanding, but govern it. And better surely it is that we should know all we need to know, and yet think our knowledge imperfect, than that we should think our knowledge perfect, and yet not know anything we need to know.'<sup>2</sup>

Before we move on to consider the pattern of scepticism and the way in which Bacon's thought is related to each phase of it, let us look at the use he proposes to make of doubt in spite of his denigration of sceptics old and new. Of the latter detraction, the most striking example is to be found at the beginning of his essay 'Of Truth'.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, p. 115.

'Certainly there be that delight in giddiness, and count it a bondage to fix a belief; affecting free-will in thinking, as well as in acting. And though the sects of philosophers of that kind be gone, yet there remain certain discoursing wits which are of the same veins, though there be not so much blood in them as was in those of the ancients.'<sup>1</sup>

With this abrupt dismissal of Pyrrho and his Renaissance disciples Bacon goes on to treat of both lying and the pursuit of truth with a considerable debt to Montaigne, of whose labelling of the genre of the essay he says, 'The word is late, but the thing is ancient'.<sup>2</sup> However, just as in this first essay, there is elsewhere a large but unacknowledged debt to Montaigne as Bacon elaborates throughout his work many of the sceptic virtues such as doubting, weighing pro against con, and keeping under strict control one's unruly haste to generalize from an inadequate array of facts. The famous sentence from 'Of Studies' is an example: 'Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider'.<sup>3</sup> This is the sceptic *epoché* brought up to date. Contention Bacon cannot think of as a legitimate tool of truth-seeking: 'for my part, as I affect not to dissent, so I purpose not to contend'.<sup>4</sup> When in 1603 he assessed his own qualifications as a discoverer of truth, he put immediately after his ability to grasp both 'the resemblances of things' and 'their subtler differences' his 'being gifted by nature with desire to seek, patience to doubt, fondness to meditate, slowness to assert, readiness to reconsider, carefulness to dispose and set in order . . .'.<sup>5</sup> All these qualities characterize the sceptic thinker as well. In one of his flashes of psychological insight Bacon reaches into the hidden origins of dogmatism and lays them bare.

'For as knowledges are now delivered, there is a kind of contract

<sup>1</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Of the Interpretation of Nature', p. 151.

of error between the deliverer and the receiver: for he that delivereth knowledge desireth to deliver it in such form as may be best believed, and not as may be best examined; and he that receiveth knowledge desireth rather present satisfaction than expectant inquiry; and so rather not to doubt than not to err: glory making the author not to lay open his weakness, and sloth making the disciple not to know his strength.<sup>1</sup>

'Expectant inquiry' may be held to represent the watchword of creative scepticism. Neither the proud and dogmatic teacher nor the lazy and dogmatic disciple can understand what this means. Even the doubts and questions, in this realm of dogmatism, are frozen into position, and there is no hope of a thaw. Bacon's proposal, as always, is not to make 'certain things doubtful' but 'to make doubtful things certain'.<sup>2</sup> Finally there is the famous passage in *The Advancement of Learning* where Bacon advocates 'due and mature suspension of judgment', quite in the spirit of Pyrrhonian *epoché*.

'For the two ways of contemplation are not unlike the two ways of action commonly spoken of by the ancients; the one plain and smooth in the beginning, and in the end impassable; the other rough and troublesome in the entrance, but after a while fair and even. So it is in contemplation; if a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.'<sup>3</sup>

If we will contemplate this passage carefully, it perhaps will prove to have within it the clue to the nature of Bacon's scepticism.

Bound up with his temperamental optimism is Bacon's deep conviction that, not in his own lifetime, but within a few generations the devoted use of his inductive method will lead men safely into the precincts of truth, where they may operate effectively for

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 304.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

the improvement of man's life on earth. It is to this end that he proposes the immediate smashing of the idols which interpose themselves between man the seeker and the great world of nature, the clear sight whereof will enable man to act for the betterment of the human condition. By the four idols are to be understood properties of that glass through which man on earth sees darkly. Bacon's pronouncement on them constitutes his contribution to a definition of nescience, the first element of the sceptic pattern. We have heard Bacon's disavowal of complete nescience (including distrust of the senses) as irresponsible and not geared to the life of action which he proposes. His variation upon the sceptic position is that man at the moment is ignorant of many things but that this ignorance is itself understandable and curable since it arises from his stopping short at the worship of idols instead of pushing on beyond them to the truth to be mined from the book of God's works. It is true, says Bacon, that man cannot or does not, in his present state, know the truth, but this failure can be accounted for and understood. First, he is a member of the human race and hence is deceived by the idols of the tribe. Second, he is himself and therefore sees all through his own individual mutability and sets up for himself idols of the cave. Third, the words he and other men use obscure the facts, and so the idols of the market place engender empty controversies. Fourth, he has unthinkingly accepted other men's dogmatisms and the methods of his teachers and so has erected idols of the theatre to be worshipped instead of the truth. At the end of his analysis of the idols Bacon again reveals his optimism and his conviction that man's nescience need not remain an incurable disease.

'For a knowledge of the signs [that systems of philosophy are in a bad condition] prepares assent; an explanation of the causes removes the marvel—which two things will do much to render the extirpation of idols from the understanding more easy and gentle.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism LXX, p. 69.



All Bacon's statements concerning nescience, which make him at first glance appear to be a creative sceptic, are followed immediately by his prescription for overcoming nescience and so emerging into the light of truth. 'Nor need any one be alarmed by such suspension of judgment in one who maintains not simply that nothing can be known, but only that nothing can be known except in a certain course and way.'<sup>1</sup> He is trying to open a new and untried way for the understanding, which 'unless directed and assisted, is a thing unequal, and quite unfit to contend with the obscurity of things'.<sup>2</sup> This obscurity itself breeds a kind of subtlety in nature which is 'greater many times over than the subtlety of argument'.<sup>3</sup> Hence the idols of the market place are to be torn down since they falsify and distort the facts. Bacon seems to imply that man may know more than he can express.

In regard to only one kind of knowledge is Bacon willing to admit that perhaps man's nescience is irremediable, and this is the pinnacle of the pyramid of knowledge, metaphysics. Man may never be competent to grasp formal and final causes. Bacon says of metaphysics, 'We know not whether man's inquiry can attain unto it'.<sup>4</sup> There on the peak with metaphysics (or on one equally high) dwells divinity, wherein Bacon recognizes that

'... many things must be left abrupt and concluded with this: *O altitudo sapientiae et scientiae Dei! quam incomprehensibilia sunt iudicia ejus, et non investigabiles viae ejus!* [O the depth of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!] So again the apostle saith, *Ex parte scimus* [we know in part], and to have the form of a total where there is but matter for a part, cannot be without supplies by supposition and presumption.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The Plan of *The Great Instauration*', p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism XXI, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Aphorism XXIV, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 258.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

The reader of these lines recalls Thomas Browne's use of an *O altitudo!* when his reason has been strained to its farthest reaches. This is one of the few points at which the two men come together, significantly upon the impossibility of finding out the ways of God. But Bacon has already disavowed an ambition to penetrate the book of God's word, and the above passage helps to make his decision seem a reasonable one in view of man's incurable nescience in matters of divinity. One can only wonder to what extent the same condition prevails in the realm of God's works.

If Bacon had shared the kind of nescience Montaigne knew, he would have been able from time to time, like Montaigne, to execute a complete bouleversement of his intellectual position and ask whether he was playing with his cat or his cat was playing with him. Such intellectual frivolity would have been unthinkable to the intense and dedicated Bacon, and his consequent Puritanism of the mind governed also his treatment of dualisms, whose recognition constitutes the second phase of the sceptic pattern. Bacon apparently passed through no stage in which he collected and juggled with and marvelled at the infinite variety of the world's dualisms. Instead, he perceptively analyzes their origins and then proceeds to find a basis for uniting them or, in other cases, for utilizing them in the interests of his inductive method. What Bacon objects to in the older kind of induction is that since it proceeds 'by simple enumeration', it 'is always liable to be upset by a contradictory instance . . .'.<sup>1</sup> His own rugged method of analyzing experience and taking it to pieces includes all possibilities—negations as well as affirmations, which he tries to consider indifferently.

'The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects, in order that

<sup>1</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, 'The Plan of *The Great Instauration*', p. 20.

by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusions may remain inviolate.<sup>1</sup>

Bacon cites in support of this generalization the pictures drawn on chapel walls of people paying their vows after having escaped shipwreck and the devil's advocate who asks, "Aye . . . but where are they painted that were drowned after their vows?"<sup>2</sup> The human intellect, says Bacon, is 'more moved and excited by affirmatives than by negatives . . . in the establishment of any true axiom, the negative instance is the more forcible of the two'.<sup>3</sup>

'For to conclude upon an enumeration of particulars without instance contradictory is no conclusion, but a conjecture; for who can assure (in many subjects) upon those particulars which appear of a side, that there are not other on the contrary side which appear not?'<sup>4</sup>

Thus Bacon would bravely collect opposites and trust his following of nature's lead to see him through, convinced that he must never turn away from even the most contradictory evidence.

Many dualisms which worried his contemporaries Bacon was not upset by. He saw man as partaking of the natures of both God and beast without drawing any striking or subtle conclusions therefrom. Neither was he torn apart by the claims of reason and revelation. He had settled for himself (and for the world, he hoped) how reason should operate in extracting the truth from the book of God's works and its very different role in drawing deductions from the placets of revelation, already given like the axiomatic rules of a chess game. He saw no problem here except when the two realms were not kept separate.

'Any presumed knowledge of an Infinite God through an examination of finite natural things marks an attempt to bring

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism XLVI, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 288.

God's nature within the orbit of attributes which belong to his creatures.'<sup>1</sup>

Here it seems to be the glory of God which Bacon is trying to protect.

When he comes to deal with imagination, he sees it as 'a Janus with two faces',<sup>2</sup> an agent or messenger between the realm of the understanding and the reason on one hand and that of the will, appetite, and affection on the other. The distinction between the two realms is clear, but imagination can come and go unhindered. Perhaps a more subtle or less organized mind might have been puzzled by its own next aphorism: 'the face toward Reason hath the print of Truth, but the face toward Action hath the print of Good'.<sup>3</sup> Yet Bacon will not go into the dangerous question of how to fortify the imagination, and hence he never quite works out a satisfactory theory of poetry, which was as much a thorn in his flesh as it was in Plato's—and perhaps for similar reasons.

Bacon's chief rule with respect to dualisms is that of each pair neither part should be lost sight of. The virtues of both should be preserved.

'The steady and acute mind can fix its contemplations and dwell and fasten on the subtlest distinctions; the lofty and discursive mind recognizes and puts together the finest and most general resemblances. Both kinds, however, easily err in excess, by catching the one at gradations, the other at shadows.'<sup>4</sup>

As Bacon considers that he has the virtues of both types, so he urges that both be employed, the one to check and balance the other. So also men must beware of pledging themselves to the antique or to the novel but must transcend these loyalties and be

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, *The Philosophy . . .*, p. 213.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 283.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism LV, p. 55.

guided, as from the fountainhead, by 'the light of nature and experience, which is eternal.'<sup>1</sup> The general rule in the case of such dualisms Bacon states in terms of his perceptive psychology. Explaining ways of destroying the idols of the cave, he advises:

'And generally let every student of nature take this as a rule: that whatever his mind seizes and dwells upon with particular satisfaction is to be held in suspicion, and that so much the more care is to be taken in dealing with such questions to keep the understanding even and clear.'<sup>2</sup>

Bacon's century often symbolized this procedure as the pulling of a crooked stick straight. The technique issues in logic which is very close to the Ramism which exerted such a shaping influence upon Puritan thought.

'Apparently Bacon is, to a point, in agreement with them [the Ramists], although he generally condemns their attempts to provide a substitute for Aristotle's logic. He seems to adopt two of their rules of proof: first, that the established proposition must in all instances be true—the Ramist rule of "truth"; and secondly, that the converse of a true axiom must also be in a sense true—the Ramist rule of "prudence" '<sup>3</sup>

This practice comes very close to the isosothenia of the Pyrrhonists. Bacon's most satisfactory statement of his position occurs in an aphorism in Book I of *The New Organon*.

'Those who have handled sciences have been either men of experiment or men of dogmas. The men of experiment are like the ant, they only collect and use; the reasoners resemble spiders, who make cobwebs out of their own substance. But the bee takes a middle course: it gathers its material from the flowers of the garden

*Ibid.* <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Aphorism LVIII, p. 56. <sup>3</sup> Anderson, *The Philosophy*. . . , p. 83.

and of the field, but transforms and digests it by a power of its own.<sup>1</sup>

From contemplating this figure it is not difficult to understand that 'our road does not lie on a level, but ascends and descends; first ascending to axioms, then descending to works'.<sup>2</sup> These are the light-bearing and fruit-bearing experiments whose continual interplay and alteration mark out the Baconian inductive road to truth. The progression must be a step at a time—from experience to the lowest axioms (barely above experience) and then to intermediate axioms and finally, cautiously, to the 'highest and most general'.<sup>3</sup> But, as usual, Bacon's heart is not in metaphysics. '... the middle are the true and solid and living axioms, on which depend the affairs and fortunes of men', and it is in their light that nescience is minimized by a plan to destroy the idols and that dualisms are harnessed to the world's work.

In the tidy method proposed by Bacon, there is, as might be expected, little room for paradox, the third element in the pattern of creative scepticism. Temperamentally, Bacon is not the kind of person who is sensitive to the paradoxical or who would long dwell upon the implications of its tensions. To do so would be to lay himself open to the charge of playing an intellectual game of seeking to enjoy the contemplation of truth rather than putting it to use in improving the lot of man. However, two notable paradoxes occur, significantly in the *Essays*, where their inclusion may have been dictated either by Bacon's unacknowledged heritage from Montaigne or by the current fashion of paradox-writing, of which Donne was the most notable of the English exemplars. In the essay 'Of Unity in Religion', which represents in short compass Bacon's extensive controversial writings on the subject, he likens the intelligent man's view of the seeming differences among ignorant men to God's view of the ideological differences among even the most learned of his children.

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, ed., *op. cit.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism XCV, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Aphorism CIII, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Aphorism CIV, p. 98.

'A man that is of judgment and understanding shall sometimes hear ignorant men differ, and know well within himself that those which so differ mean one thing, and yet they themselves would never agree. And if it come so to pass in that distance of judgment which is between man and man, shall we not think that God above, that knows the heart, doth not discern that frail men in some of their contradictions intend the same thing; and accepteth of both?'<sup>1</sup>

Had Bacon paused to contemplate the implications of this analogy, he might have been led through the mazes of nescience, by way of the parallel paths of dualisms, into the true inwardness of paradox, wherein, had he lingered there a bit, he might have emerged far less certain of the infallibility of his method.

From a slightly different point of view Bacon sets down among the causes of superstition in his essay on that subject 'the taking an aim at divine matters by human, which cannot but breed mixture of imaginations'.<sup>2</sup> This observation put alongside the one above from 'The Unity of Religion' should have given pause to some of Bacon's contemporaries, and from that pause they might have roused themselves with a far more complex attitude toward the problems of knowing than Bacon was ever able to achieve. His closest approximation to the paradoxical language of such putative fellow-thinkers is contained in the pronouncement:

'There is a superstition in avoiding superstition, when men think to do best if they go furthest from the superstition formerly received. . . .'<sup>3</sup>

However, if one looks closely at this statement, one sees that it does not have the multi-layered quality which usually distinguishes the paradoxes of a Donne or a Browne. A truth along the *via media* is implied here but not a very convoluted or difficult truth. Browne said the same thing by pointing up the occasions

<sup>1</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

on which he as an Anglican was prompted to cross himself or breathe a prayer for the dead or respond to an Ave Mary bell, but these were not Browne's most characteristic and deep-probing paradoxes.

The reader who may have been disappointed by Bacon's score on the first three concerns of the creative sceptic—nescience, dualism, and paradox—will no doubt anticipate his perfect performance in the fourth: action as the road to knowledge. Does not Bacon's whole method find its justification in the ability to 'command nature in action'<sup>1</sup> 'for the benefit and use of life'?<sup>2</sup> His fellow-workers are to inquire into 'the moving principles, whereby, things are produced'.<sup>3</sup> First principles are to be by-passed in favour of 'things intermediate' which lead to 'utility and the means of working'.<sup>4</sup> As if on the left hand of God's throne at the Last Judgment stand condemned 'the rational and dogmatical sciences' with which 'the discovery of useful works came to an end'<sup>5</sup>; 'the contemplation which should be finished in itself without casting beams upon society'<sup>6</sup>; and tenets like those of the Epicureans and the Anabaptists (strange bedfellows) which 'tend to private repose and contentment, and not to point of society'.<sup>7</sup> Whether by seeking rest and withdrawal after the manner of those lookers-on, God and the angels,<sup>8</sup> or by worrying one's mind with disputations instead of 'obtaining sovereignty by works and effects',<sup>9</sup> men try to avoid the one true way of Baconian induction and therefore lead fruitless lives. They miss as a result the satisfaction of deeds, which somehow exempt men from time, and of the kind of knowledge 'whose dignity is maintained by works of utility and power'.<sup>10</sup> Bacon breaks forth into elaborate

<sup>1</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, 'The Plan of *The Great Instauration*', p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Preface to *The Great Instauration*', p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism LXVI, p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Aphorism LXXXV, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 322.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, p. 420.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Of the Interpretation of Nature', p. 152.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.



and illuminating figures to reinforce what he is saying about the ends of knowledge.

'The explanation of . . . the true relation between the nature of things and the nature of the mind, is as the strewing and decoration of the bridal chamber of the mind and the universe, the divine goodness assisting, out of which marriage let us hope (and be this the prayer of the bridal song) there may spring helps to man, and a line and race of inventions that may in some degree subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity.'<sup>1</sup>

The generalities of the Schoolmen, Bacon says,

'are for a while good and proportionable; but then when you descend into their distinctions and decisions, instead of a fruitful womb for the use and benefit of man's life, they end in monstrous altercations and barking questions'.<sup>2</sup>

Again one sees Spenser's Dragon of Error or Milton's Portress of Hell Gate. The most elaborate and extended figure is to be found farther on in Book I of *The Advancement of Learning*, where all the philosophical procedures which Bacon disapproved of are assembled and attributed to

' . . . the mistaking or misplacing of the last or furthest end of knowledge. For men have entered into a desire of learning and knowledge, sometimes upon a natural curiosity and inquisitive appetite; sometimes to entertain their minds with variety and delight; sometimes for ornament and reputation; and sometimes to enable them to victory of wit and contradiction; and most times for lucre and profession; and seldom sincerely to give a true account of their gift of reason, to the benefit and use of men; as if there were sought in knowledge a couch whereupon to rest a searching and restless spirit; or a terrace, for a wandering and

<sup>1</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, 'The Plan of *The Great Instauration*', p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 185.

variable mind to walk up and down with a fair prospect; or a tower of state, for a proud mind to raise itself upon; or a fort or commanding gound, for strife and contention; or a shop for profit or sale; and not a rich storehouse, for the glory of the Creator and the relief of man's estate.'<sup>1</sup>

We hear again in these words the authentic tone of Bacon's youthful enthusiasm which issues in his high humanitarianism. Lest he be misunderstood and accused of crass utilitarianism, he picks up again his central figure and disavows 'vain speculations and whatsoever is empty and void' in order

'to preserve and augment whatsoever is solid and fruitful; that knowledge may not be as a curtesan, for pleasure and vanity only, or as a bond-woman, to acquire and gain to her master's use; but as a spouse, for generation, fruit, and comfort'.<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, in the charting of a philosophic method Bacon makes use of action as a limiting and guiding principle. In view of the verbal nature of Renaissance science under the influence of Aristotle, he lays down this rule:

'Though your direction seem to be certain and true by pointing you to a nature that is inseparable from the nature you inquire upon, yet if it do not carry you on to a degree or remove nearer to action, operation, or light to make or produce, it is but superficial and counterfeit.'<sup>3</sup>

This culminates, as one might expect, in the pragmatic generalization, 'what in operation is most useful, that in knowledge is most true'.<sup>4</sup> In spite of the disabilities under which men of action labour when they become writers, Bacon could wish that only

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *The Philosophy* . . . , p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, *The New Organon*, II, Aphorism IV, p. 124.

those engaged in a profession should write about it. The excessive claims made by such writers for their own professions would be offset by the 'solid and fruitful' learning which they would contribute. '... generally it were to be wished . . . that active men would or could become writers.'<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to generalize from all that Bacon says about the culmination of his method in action, pursuit, works, that he considers this stage of practical achievement to represent the *summum bonum*. However, his critics often fail to notice or take to heart an important section of *The New Organon* devoted to an expansion of what Bacon has referred to in many places as 'experiments of light', basing his speculations upon God's order of creation—first light, then works. In this passage he is replying to critics who may object that there is much in his method which appears to be 'curiously and unprofitably subtle', that is, to those understandings 'accustomed to the present system'. His reply constitutes one of those illuminating twists or unexpected pockets in his argument which open up the possibility of a kind of circularity hitherto unguessed.

'Upon this point, therefore, above all I must say again what I have said already: that at first, and for a time, I am seeking for experiments of light, not for experiments of fruit, following therein, as I have often said, the example of the divine creation which on the first day produced light only, and assigned to it alone one entire day, nor mixed up with it on that day any material work.'<sup>2</sup>

We have already seen how important timing is to Bacon and how the advantage of his method over that of the schoolmen is that he does not rush headlong into ill-based generalizations but dwells painstakingly among particulars, yet in the passage which we have just quoted he seems relaxed enough to linger among the experiments of light until he can with poise and confidence move

<sup>1</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, *The Advancement of Learning*, p. 329.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson ed., *op. cit.*, *The New Organon*, I, Aphorism CXXI, p. 110.

on to the performance of 'material work'. Dedicated as Bacon is to works and to the improvement of man's lot, he nevertheless recognizes that it is necessary first to get his bearings through a concentration on light. Impatient as he is with the mere contemplators, he nevertheless announces his purpose in terms which come very close to their own manifestoes. After stressing the vast difference between 'the idols of the human mind and the ideas of the divine', he characterizes the latter as 'the Creator's own stamp upon creation, impressed and defined in matter by true and exquisite lines'.<sup>1</sup> It is these lines which Bacon hopes to clarify by his 'experiments of light' in order to build 'in the human understanding a true model of the world'.<sup>2</sup> This sounds very much as if the balance were swinging to the side of truth rather than utility or that the two were somehow being equated. The aphorism ends with the rather startling statement, in view of what seems to be the principal focus of Bacon's thought, that 'works themselves are of greater value as pledges of truth than as contributing to the comforts of life'.<sup>3</sup> The reader wonders whether 'works' here could not apply equally to those of God and those of man. Bacon is fond of depicting man's works as following at some distance the works of God, and he seems to come close to saying that both can be considered 'pledges of truth'. As he goes on to discuss the implications of God's creation of light on the first day, Bacon makes a great deal of the uses of light—'enabling us to walk, to ply our arts, to read, to recognize one another . . .'.<sup>4</sup> Light underlies all our activities and makes them possible. ' . . . the very beholding of the light is itself a more excellent and a fairer thing than all the uses of it. . . .'<sup>5</sup> Then comes a statement which even those who have read Bacon carefully may not be quite prepared for: ' . . . the very contemplation of things as they are, without superstition or imposture, error or confusion, is in itself more worthy than all the fruit of inventions.'<sup>6</sup> This does not sound like the credo of a utilitarian. It sounds very much more

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, Aphorism CXXIV, pp. 113-14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Aphorism CXXX, p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

like the confession of a creative sceptic who has learned to put his practical activity into the service of a clear and deep vision of the world's truth.

Where then must we put Bacon on the scale of creative scepticism? And why is there to this day so much controversy over the nature of his mind and the quality of his influence? Having so much in common with the sceptics on the score of nescience, the constructive use of doubt, and the role of action, how does it happen that he has come, in the long run, to stand for values so different from theirs as to render him and his followers, for the most part, obnoxious to later thinkers in the sceptic tradition?

To answer these questions fully would involve a minute inspection of all the English and Latin works of Bacon plus his correspondence and other peripheral writings. However, it is possible to suggest some answers on the basis of a thoughtful survey of the English works, answers which, I have no doubt, can be borne out in more detailed studies.

The key to the relationship of Francis Bacon to the sceptic tradition may lie in the fourth phase of scepticism, that of doing in order to know. By far the greatest number of Bacon's pronouncements in this area, as we have seen, imply that one should know in order to do and not that one must do in order to know. This may seem to be a picayune distinction, but the implications behind it are momentous as they relate to other phases of the sceptic pattern. Doing for the sake of knowing implies not merely an initial nescience which by the correct method can be overcome but the persistent and perennial recognition that man knows very little and in comparison with God almost nothing at all. Hence a motive force is supplied not only for the elaboration and proliferation of dualisms but also for the fashioning of paradoxes in the hope that truth may somehow be adumbrated. Where all paradoxes break down logically, they point on beyond themselves to action as the expression of a far more complex and inclusive truth than can ever be put into words. Thus action is thrust solidly to the forefront.

In contrast to this pattern, Bacon seems for the most part to be

advocating the acquisition of knowledge for the sake of subsequent action. This implies a nescience curable by means of the inductive method and hence nothing of the circular or cyclical experience undergone by the thinker whose nescience is his constant or recurrent companion. Rather it points the way to a linear progression from nescience by way of the destruction of idols and across a green field where dualisms and paradoxes are curious but not very relevant to the search for truth which, at least in relation to God's works, is becoming progressively clearer and by whose light man performs works of his own in imitation of those of his Creator. Thus man's destiny is fulfilled, and in this steady forward march (so unlikely in human experience) there is no intermittent return to nescience for a breath of fresh air and a new attack on the normally recalcitrant problem of man's knowing—an experience usually resulting in the conviction that the process of truth-seeking can never reach a plateau of satisfactory achievement but must keep swinging out into ever widening circles. If this is a justifiable analysis of the difference between Bacon's thought and the basic pattern of scepticism, then perhaps it is not difficult to see where his thought crosses and recrosses that of Montaigne and yet comes out at a very different door.

Near the end of *The New Atlantis*, which raises more questions than it answers concerning the ultimate significance of Bacon's thought, the Father of Salomon's House dismisses Bacon after a most illuminating interview with the words, 'I give thee leave to publish it for the good of other nations; for we are here in God's bosom, a land unknown'.<sup>1</sup> The Utopian character of the New Atlantis, when seen in relation to Bacon's other writings, indicates that there men are leading an ideal existence, exposed to the truth of nature and nature's God and able to lay hold on it by the development of an inductive method designed according to Bacon's specifications. Investigators are sent secretly to the main continents to obtain relevant information but not to trade or establish permanent relations, apparently for fear of contamination

<sup>1</sup> Dick ed., *op. cit.*, p. 584.

by less enlightened inhabitants of the earth. Whatever Bacon and his friends discover in this imaginary land is ordered according to common sense, and the reader is comforted to discover that God's bosom, even though it be a land unknown, is not a land unknowable. The travellers are in a way prepared for what they find since it represents merely a further projection of something they already understand. This is a controlled vision and not the kind which leaps from peak to peak and before which the shocked visionary can cry with Job, 'I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'<sup>1</sup> There awaits the Baconian inductive scientist no such disturbing revelation. The heaven at which he arrives, albeit by accident, is a foreseeable heaven, for he has built it himself, step by painful step. It embodies the *Zerissenheit* of no paradoxes and never sets the protagonist down again at the point from which he started. In short, it generates no surprises, no absurdities, and therefore no humour. The philosopher continues to play happily with his cat, secure in the knowledge that their roles can never be reversed and that the world, and Heaven too, have been rendered safe for rationality though they still constitute for most people, perhaps not too unfortunately, 'a land unknown'.

<sup>1</sup> Job 42: 5-6.

### III

## MILTON AND HERESY: GUIDELINES FOR A SKETCH



FOR John Milton, although he was harvesting his greatest poetry in an age which was moving in the direction of literal and confining rationalism, the truth toward which he strove was always a religious truth. Emerging as this did from his multifarious humanistic background and, as in the case of his master Spenser, from a rich mingling of Hebraism and Hellenism, this goal had the effect not of narrowing but of heightening and deepening his intellectual concerns and of giving each of them an eternal referent. It set Milton's epistemology, always of strategic importance to the seventeenth century, against a backdrop of as cosmic proportions as that of his great epic itself. When Milton, during the course of his most impressive self-education, asked himself what and how he knew, he discovered that the answers were hard to come by and that the 'how' was more approachable than the 'what'. The resultant nescience, the sense of his own ignorance, which he shared with many other Renaissance writers—with Montaigne, Donne, Browne, and even Bacon—took on a distinctive and far-ranging quality which set it apart from that of others.

Where they looked primarily at the fallibility of man's senses, at the crumbling walls of medieval science, at competing systems of cosmology or logic, at the vulgar errors of their fellows, or at the beckoning of unknown fields awaiting exploration and where they, either in despair or in elation, echoed Montaigne's question *Que sçais-je?*, Milton, in his concern with fundamental human ignorance, let his eyes rest most persistently and meaningfully upon the great gulf fixed between God's ways and thoughts and those of himself and his fellows. Not to be reminded of this



whenever he was tempted to utter a dogmatic statement was to take the first step toward misunderstanding the ways of God. To remember the gulf and its implications was insurance against brash and oversimplified answers. The second Isaiah had emphasized this disparity when he reported, 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.'<sup>1</sup> These words must have constantly echoed in Milton's ears as he sought a rationale for the postlapsarian condition of man—a condition far more complex and puzzling than the idyllic and cloistered situation of Eden.

The latter could be depicted simply and rationally. God had set the stage, marked off the boundaries of the garden, and laid down the rules. However, once the entrance of evil had upset the equilibrium and man had disobeyed God's only negative injunction, the situation changed so radically that not only was it difficult to describe, but it was almost impossible to evaluate. Was the result of the fall unmitigated evil, or was it possible somehow to justify in the face of Adam's freedom God's ordering of what had happened? Because all that men since Adam have ever known is life after the fall and because there is obviously no way of simply crawling back into Eden, must we continue to lament Adam's unfortunate choice, or is it possible by somehow coming closer, if only in nescience, to the thinking of God to penetrate this primal catastrophe and watch it opening up into unguessed vistas of meaning and good? If such an outcome is at all possible, the first move in this direction will undoubtedly be a thorough-going nescience, an openness of mind forever resisting the temptation to settle for less than the ways and thoughts of God.

Milton's sense of a basic and almost insuperable difference between man and God necessarily fed his awareness of man's nescience and thus shaped his bewildering and involuted justification of God's ways to man. In coming to an answer which is tentative, paradoxical, and, one would suppose, even incompre-

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 55:8-9.

hensible (judging by the volume of often contradictory and confusing Miltonic criticism), Milton resembles the author of the Book of Job, who depicted his protagonist as sure of nothing but that his Redeemer lived—that in his very searching and questioning he was being sustained by a power which somehow would both justify the seeking and guarantee the unforeseeable form which the answer would take. 'Oh that I knew where I might find him', Job had cried, and the perhaps impenetrable answer came to him as a snowballing series of questions asked by God Himself out of the whirlwind. An equally unpredictable answer came to Milton as a conviction which, at once simple and complex in its penetration, required the majestic sweep of *Paradise Lost* against the background of his other works for its adequate expression. In the case of neither the Job author nor Milton can one put into precise words what the answer is because it transcends words and loses itself creatively in the depths of each man's living experience. All the critic can do is to lead the reader to a point where, like Moses on Pisgah, he can envision it and go on living by its light.

Instead of presenting God talking to man directly (because he is convinced that they speak different languages) or of dealing by means of abstractions with the question of what human knowledge may achieve, Milton using Adam as his protagonist depicts dramatically a series of stages through which God is able to teach man by the intermediary of first the angel Raphael and later the angel Michael. The clue to this whole educational process, and hence to Milton's justification of God's ways, is that in order for man to understand the workings of God's providence these must be somehow stepped down or presented in terms of shadows and analogies. Theologians as far apart as Aquinas and Calvin had recognized a 'doctrine of accommodation, by which God's reality is typologically reduced from incomprehensibility and expressed in terms "accommodated" to human understanding'.<sup>1</sup> Milton himself, in the spirit of Luther's observation that 'without

<sup>1</sup> R. M. Frye, *God, Man, and Satan* (Princeton; Oxford 1960), p. 9.

skill in literature genuine theology cannot stand',<sup>1</sup> explicitly endorsed this doctrine in 'De Doctrina Christiana'.

'Our safest way is to form in our minds such a conception of God as shall correspond with his own delineation and representation of himself in the sacred writings. For granted that both in the literal and figurative descriptions of God, he is exhibited not as he really is, but in such a manner as may be within the scope of our comprehensions, yet we ought to maintain such a conception of him as he, in condescending to accommodate himself to our capacities, has shown that he desires we should conceive. For it is on this very account that he has lowered himself to our level, lest in our flights above the reach of human understanding, and beyond the written word of Scripture, we should be tempted to indulge in vague cogitations and subtleties.'<sup>2</sup>

The accommodation is to be initiated on the part of God and not of man, whose legitimate response is the stretching upward unencumbered by dogmatisms and guided by a strenuous interpretation of scripture by means of the light which God has vouchsafed him.

The warning against 'vague cogitations and subtleties' recalls the vivid description of the fallen angels retiring to a hill and reasoning

... high

Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate,  
Fixt Fate, Free will, Foreknowledge absolute ...<sup>3</sup>

The reader who comes to *Paradise Lost* prepared to enjoy a philosophical poem on the subject of man's free will and a justification of all God's ways may be shocked to confront in this description of Hell a kind of parody of what he may conceive to

<sup>1</sup> 'Letter to Eoban Hess, March 29, 1523', in *Werke*, Weimar Edition, *Briefwechsel*, III, 50.

<sup>2</sup> John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. M. Y. Hughes (New York [1957]), p. 905.

<sup>3</sup> *Paradise Lost*, II, 58-60.

be the normal way of approaching such matters. Milton's implications here point firmly in the direction of man's ignorance and of his inability by taking thought to find out God. To measure the difference between the deliberations of the angels in Hell and those through which Milton leads his reader is to understand something of the truth toward which he is pointing. The former attack the problem directly and straightforwardly on the assumption that they can handle it, while Milton's is a tentative and imaginative approach prepared at every turning for the situation to be far different from what he had thought.

Francis Bacon, although not writing for the most part about obviously religious truth, had strikingly set forth the contrast between man's procedure and God's in *The Advancement of Learning* when he said that if man had been set the task of arranging the stars in the heavens, he would have cast them 'into some pleasant and beautiful works and orders, like the frets in the roofs of houses; whereas one can scarce find a posture in square, or triangle, or straight line, amongst such an infinite number; so differing in harmony there is between the spirit of man and the spirit of nature'.<sup>1</sup> The spirit of nature, reflecting as it does for Bacon the spirit of God, since nature is the handiwork and the book of God, has produced something just as orderly as 'the frets in the roofs of houses', but the order is of a very different kind, just as the answer Job receives from God is on another plane from the answers given so glibly by his friends, answers posited on the assumption that they can easily understand the workings of God's providence in the world and that this knowledge sets them off from and above the world's uncomprehending sufferers such as Job. The difference primarily is between a direct and an oblique approach to truth. The Garden of Eden itself, with its simple arrangement and understandable rules, might symbolize the direct while the postlapsarian world as we know it, with its complexities and ambiguities, might stand for the oblique, the latter reflecting the nature and order of God in contrast with that of man. It is for the operation of this latter that a formula is to be found. Because

<sup>1</sup> Everyman Library (London [1950]), p. 133.

of the fundamental dissimilarity and incongruity between man and God (though man is the creature of God and is sustained by God's breath), man's approach to God's truth must necessarily be by way of paradox and, as it were, on the bias. If this be true, one would suppose that Eden was never considered by God to be the perfect setting but was merely man's first schoolroom, meant to signify the kind of cloistered virtue which he must transcend on his way to the knowledge of good by knowing evil.

Among an array of paradoxes ranging downward in complexity from the central paradox of the fortunate fall and its corollary that God's foreknowledge was not responsible for that fall, let us look carefully at one which springs from the unique and essentially Protestant way in which Milton defines heresy. The prose pamphlet of Milton's which most nearly resembles in spirit the outstanding work of his friend Roger Williams in America (*The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*) is entitled 'A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes: Showing That It Is Not Lawful for Any Power on Earth to Compel in Matters of Religion'. Proceeding upon his consistently held principle that the individual Christian must search out for himself the truth of scripture by the guidance of the Holy Spirit within him (a principle which Emerson was to employ later with respect to the scriptures of the whole world), Milton denies to any 'man or body of men' the right to 'be the infallible judges or determiners in matters of religion to any other men's consciences but their own.'<sup>1</sup> The reasoning behind this is obvious since an individual can easily recall his own mistaken notions but not those which he has imposed upon others. (Emerson's berating of consistency sprang from precisely this kind of situation.) In the course of developing his idea Milton not only turns the charge of heresy against the papists who make it, but he sets the epithet 'heretic' itself on its head when he avers that 'no man in religion is properly a heretic at this day, but he who maintains traditions or opinions not probable by scripture . . .'.<sup>2</sup> The paradoxical climax of the argument comes when Milton declares that 'he [is] the only heretic

<sup>1</sup> Hughes ed., *op. cit.*, p. 841.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 844.

who counts all heretics but himself'.<sup>1</sup> The reader can block in roughly the features of the smug dogmatist for whom all questions are answered and all problems solved and who can therefore assume the role of God, think His thoughts, and like the 'comforters' of Job, put all his fellow-men in their places. Milton had drawn in 'Areopagitica' an amusing picture of one such dogmatist-heretic who, assuming that all was settled and that religious truth was something known and almost tangible, turned over the religious concerns of his household to a hired chaplain so that he himself could go about his business untroubled by such matters.

But there are far more profound implications in the charge that whoever takes over his religion ready-made without having pulled it up for himself in the bucket of reason from the deep well of scripture is the real heretic. The self-righteous and scornful dogmatism of the man who considers all other men heretics is what Milton is bent upon avoiding. Such dogmatism often included a belief that the world had been steadily decaying, physically and morally, since Eden, which was thought to represent the perfect arrangement. It is significant for the later direction of Milton's thinking that as early as the 1628 *Naturam non patitur senium* ('That Nature is Not Subject to Old Age') he was launching an attack against this idea. (It has been conceded that the *Naturam* cannot be dismissed as a mere academic exercise<sup>2</sup> since in common with Milton's other early writing it forecasts accurately his coming insights.) Noteworthy also is the fact that the opening lines of *Naturam* make reference not only to the 'Oedipean night' in man's breast but also to man's measuring God's acts and laws by his own, thus binding 'the immutable plan of fate to the perishing hours'.

*Heu quam perpetuis erroribus acta fatiscit  
 Avia mens hominum, tenebrisque immersa profundis  
 Oedipodioniam volvitur sub pectore noctem!*

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> See V. Harris, *All Coherence Gone* (Chicago [1949]), p. 160n and Z. S. Fink, *The Classical Republicans* [Evanston, 1962], Chap. 4 on the continuity of Milton's political ideas.

*Quae vesana suis metiri facta deorum  
Audet, et incisas leges adamante perenni  
Assimilare suis, nulloque solubile saeclo  
Consilium fati perituris alligat horis.*

(Alas! how persistent are the errors by which the wandering mind of man is pursued and overweared, and how profound is the darkness of the Oedipean night in his breast! His insane mind dare make its own acts the measure of those of the gods and compare its own laws to those that are written upon eternal adamant; and it binds the eternally immutable plan of fate to the perishing hours.)<sup>1</sup>

Giving the idea of heresy still another twist, Milton says in 'Areopagitica', 'A man may be a heretic in the truth; and if he believe things only because his pastor says so, or the Assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy'.<sup>2</sup> Here not so much what one believes as how he believes it constitutes the real heresy. The man who blindly follows other men's thoughts in these matters is a heretic, for his experience of his own nescience has not prepared him as it should for that of others. He is in the same class with the man whose *hubris* convinces him that he can easily read the thoughts of God.

Those who hurled the charge of heretic at Milton belonged to one or both of these two groups and berated him because his ideas conflicted with theirs, for which they considered they had justifiable authority—either their own 'vain cogitations and subtleties', those of their pastor, the Assembly, or some other surrogate. In doing so they made three striking assumptions: first, that the truth or the answer to man's questions is known; second, that this answer is a simple and direct one; and third, that it is unnecessary for anyone to seek further. These three assumptions add up to a static dogmatism which the whole thrust of Milton's life and thought was dedicated to undermining—a life and thought which he focussed as with a burning glass in the definition of a heretic as one 'who counts all heretics but himself'.

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 739.

Over against the assumptions of his opponents, who would compel the consciences of men, Milton by his life and writings proclaimed three diametrically opposite principles (and hence laid the immutable foundations of spiritual liberty): first, that man does not yet know the truth or the answer to his deepest questions; second, that whatever truth he has thus far been able to ferret out is not statable in simple and direct terms but only by means of the paradoxical and the oblique; and third, that the real answer (at once unassailable and progressively developing) lies in eternally seeking a closer approximation to God's truth and that since one must be a great poem in order to write a great poem, so one must do in order finally to know.

Having now determined the large outlines of this discussion, let us scrutinize carefully three relevant passages in *Paradise Lost* which, seen from the point of view sketched above, may yield new insights. The first passage, in Book V, sets the stage for Adam's education. Raphael has reinforced the commandment to obey God by citing the unsuccessful rebellion of the angels, an enormity which Adam in his naïveté cannot believe in—

what thou tell'st

Hath past in Heav'n, some doubt within me move[s] . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Adam's request for the whole story leads Raphael to a classic enunciation of the doctrine of accommodation.

High matter thou injoin'st me, O prime of men,  
Sad task and hard, for how shall I relate  
To human sense th' invisible exploits  
Of warring Spirits; how without remorse  
The ruin of so many glorious once  
And perfet while they stood; how last unfold  
The secrets of another World, perhaps  
Not lawful to reveal? yet for thy good  
This is dispens't, and what surmounts the reach  
Of human sense, I shall delineate so,  
By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 553-4.



As may express them best, though what if Earth  
 Be but the shadow of Heav'n, and things therein  
 Each to other like, more than on Earth is thought!<sup>1</sup>

It is evident from these lines that the angel is not merely satisfying Adam's idle curiosity but that he is, in keeping with the purpose of his mission, attempting to educate Adam for his own good, Adam who will be faced with a free and responsible choice and, for whatever reason, will fall. Raphael's problem is that even between angels and men there is sufficient disparity to make the story a difficult one to relate to his eager questioner. The principle by which he will proceed is clear to him; he will liken 'spiritual to corporal forms' as a means of reaching 'human sense'. Readers of *Paradise Lost* are aware of how often this leads to literalism on Adam's part and of how difficult it is for him (and them) to separate analogy from statement. Indeed, Milton's whole conception of the relationship of body to spirit and of time to eternity is bound up with this principle; it is founded in a sustained metaphysical analogy which is not closed but points on beyond itself toward the truth it is adumbrating. The best Raphael can do is to suggest by means of the very useful expression 'what if' that Heaven and earth may be related to each other as substance is to shadow.

It is significant that wherever Milton wants to leave in suspension the final truth of a matter, as in the case of his later balancing the Copernican and Ptolemaic systems, he makes frequent use of 'what if' in order to bring home vividly to his reader the variant possibilities without tipping the scales in favour of either. The *epoché* of the Pyrrhonists could not have envisaged a more perfect balance. The question of Raphael casts doubt upon the common assumption of men that earth and Heaven are very different. They may, he suggests, be counterparts of one another—even though man may not assume that God's thoughts are the counterparts of his own. The purpose of Raphael's question ('What if Earth/ Be but the shadow of Heav'n . . .?') seems to be

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 563-76.

not so much to establish a principle as to keep Adam's thinking flexible" by always questioning it just when it is in danger of settling down into the 'fine conformity' into which Milton feared, in 'Areópagitica', all men would be starched if censorship were to be responsible for the ideas which would circulate—'Doubtless a staunch and solid piece of framework, as any January could freeze together.'<sup>1</sup>

When his prelapsarian mind has been satisfied concerning the war in Heaven (and Raphael hopes that its moral import has sunk in), Adam attempts, understandably, to make the most of this pipeline to eternal truth by proposing a more complex dilemma. Near the beginning of Book VIII he is concerned about the apparent wastage in the universe since the stars and planets are apparently performing their myriad gyrations solely for the benefit of lighting and warming man on earth. In responding patiently to Adam's question, Raphael makes it clear at once that the asking and searching of man are not to be condemned since the heavens, as Bacon later insisted, constitute God's book. At the same time, to prevent Adam's embarrassment at not knowing whether it is the heavens or the earth which move, Raphael assures him that the answer to this question 'imports not'. The juxtaposition of these two replies would seem to imply that man's intellectual quest is of more significance than the specific answers he may light upon along the way, especially since man is always, as we have seen, in danger of becoming 'a heretic in the truth'. In fact, in his far-flung majesty God may laugh at man's 'quaint opinions wide' when he undertakes to 'model Heaven/ And calculate the Stars'.<sup>2</sup> Raphael reinforces Adam's nescience by pointing out that many of his assumptions are invalid—for example, the assumption that the great, bright sun is more important than the small, dark earth and that man's setting should be proportionate to his size, not so large as to dwarf him. God knows, says Raphael, the uses to which the rest of the universe, all that lies beyond man's immediate environment, is to be devoted—God, not nescient man.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 740.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 79-80.

The swiftness of those circles' attribute,  
 Though numberless, to his Omnipotence,  
 That to corporeal substances could add  
 Speed almost Spiritual. . . .<sup>1</sup>

These lines recall the several conversations of Adam and Raphael concerning their respective natures and hence concerning the relation of body to spirit and the question of whether man will one day proceed so far in the direction of spirit as a limit that he will be indistinguishable from the angels. Joseph Glanvill paralleled Milton's confrontation of 'corporeal substances' and 'speed almost spiritual' by asking how a sunbeam could dwell in a lump of clay. The problem never ceased to fascinate seventeenth-century thinkers.

Raphael recalls his own swift flight from heaven, completed before noon (earth time), in which he covered 'distance inexpressible/ By Numbers that have name.'<sup>2</sup> Here again real distance is implied but not of a kind which man can name—perhaps because earth is only the shadow of Heaven. Then by a series of doublings, Raphael completely upsets Adam's earth-bound reason with regard to movement in the heavens.

But this I urge,  
 Admitting Motion in the Heav'ns, to show  
 Invalid that which thee to doubt it mov'd;  
 Not that I so affirm, though so it seems  
 To thee who hast thy dwelling here on Earth.<sup>3</sup>

Adam now has the assurance, straight from the mouth of an angel, that there both is and is not heavenly movement—the implication being that the thoughts of God are far removed from those of man and that God's can find earthly expression or reception only by means of paradox. The angel has not told Adam there is motion in the heavens, but he has undercut Adam's dogmatic assumption that there can be none and thus has attempted to free Adam by reminding him of his own nescience. Ac-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 107-10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 113-14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 114-18.

according to Raphael, this educational situation is no accident but is the result of planning—the motivation for which, however, is hidden.

God to remove His ways from human sense,  
Plac'd Heav'n from Earth so far, that earthly sight,  
If it presume, might err in things too high,  
And no advantage gain.<sup>1</sup>

Adam is not being beaten down and penalized for his curiosity, as Job's friends thought he was, but the whole force of the universe is swung about to show man that he is pursuing an unprofitable course. Then Raphael once again introduces alternatives with 'what if'—this time the alternatives being the centrality of the sun or that of the earth to the universe.

But whether thus these things, or whether not, . . .  
Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid,  
Leave them to God above, him serve and fear;  
Of other Creatures, as him pleases best,  
Wherever plac't, let him dispose: joy thou  
In what he gives to thee, this Paradise  
And thy fair *Eve*: Heav'n is for thee too high  
To know what passes there; be lowly wise:  
Think only what concerns thee and thy being;  
Dream not of other Worlds, what Creatures there  
Live, in what state, condition or degree,  
Contented that thus far hath been reveal'd  
Not of Earth only but of highest Heav'n.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of many marked differences between Milton and Donne, 'be lowly wise' evokes echoes of Donne's 'doubt wisely'; both imply a tentative and flexible approach to truth. The admonition to think 'only what concerns thee and thy being' has the effect of teaching Adam 'to live/ The easiest way'. Raphael explains that 'the sweet of Life' need not be interrupted unless man pursues 'wand'ring thoughts, and notions vain', like the speculative fallen angels in Hell, themselves most unproductive.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 119-22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 158, 167-78.

But apt the Mind or Fancy is to rove  
 Uncheckt, and of her roving is no end;  
 Till warn'd, or by experience taught, she learn  
 That not to know at large of things remote  
 From use, obscure and subtle, but to know  
 That which before us lies in daily life,  
 Is the prime Wisdom; what is more, is fume,  
 Or emptiness, or fond impertinence,  
 And renders us in things that most concern  
 Unpractic'd, unprepar'd, and still to seek.<sup>1</sup>

Behind this admonition there seems to be a concern for the conservation of man's psychic energy rather than for the prohibitions of a jealous God. The implication is that if man had not wasted his speculative powers on matters which could not concern the daily progress of his life, the highest truths would not be 'still to seek'.

By the time Milton pulls the threads of his great argument together in Book XII, Adam has fallen in spite of the warning by the angel; he has seen unrolled before him the disheartening history of his descendants; he has contemplated suicide to thwart this fate; and he has heard from Michael the story of Christ's triumph. Now after he and Eve have struggled through their problems together, Adam has exchanged the depression of Book X for the 'joy and wonder' which have mingled with them, as an ingredient, a new kind of paradoxical doubt. In Book X Adam was sure of his conclusion that a human history of the kind which he had previewed ought never to be, and he was ready at once to nip it in the bud. Now that he has seen more, he is puzzled about the significance of the central act of his life: should he repent his action in eating the fruit or rejoice in it, since God continuously turns evil into good? (Was it a dilemma of similar moral implications which precipitated Antinomianism, the question of whether the saved were accountable to the laws of earthly morality?) Was the fall disastrous or fortunate? He knows as little about the answer

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 188-97.

to this question (although it concerns the very centre of his being) as he does about God's plan for the universe.

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!  
That all this good of evil shall produce,  
And evil turn to good; more wonderful  
Than that which by creation first brought forth  
Light out of darkness! full of doubt I stand,  
Whether I should repent me now of sin  
By mee done and occasion'd, or rejoice  
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring,  
To God more glory, more good will to Men  
From God, and over wrath grace shall abound.<sup>1</sup>

Michael's continuing history of the Christian era gives Milton an opportunity to attack again, as he had in 'Lycidas' and for the same reasons, the hireling wolves who use the Christian message for their own low purposes and, most importantly for the point we are making here, substitute their own superstitions and traditions for 'those written Records pure,/ . . . not but by the Spirit understood' and go on in their dogmatism to force the conscience of men,

. . . force the Spirit of Grace itself, and bind  
His consort Liberty; what, but unbuild  
His living Temples, built by Faith to stand,  
Thir own Faith not another's: for on Earth  
Who against Faith and Conscience can be heard  
Infallible?<sup>2</sup>

'Their own Faith not another's' reminds us again of Milton's conception of heresy in contrast with the conventional heresy hunt,

Whence heavy persecution shall arise  
On all who in the worship persevere  
Of Spirit and Truth. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The lines recall the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well who questioned him on a point of doctrine: should God

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 469-78.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 525-30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 531-3.

be worshipped in Jerusalem or on Mt Gerizim? Jesus' retort, 'God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth' is one of the well-springs of Milton's meta-traditional and meta-ritualistic approach to religion through relying upon scripture interpreted by the spirit of man, that 'candle of the Lord' extolled so eloquently by the Cambridge Platonists. The truth is

Left only in those written Records pure  
Though not but by the Spirit understood.<sup>1</sup>

In one last sweep, Michael takes Adam in prospect to the last syllable of recorded time and into the final consummation of an eternity of

New Heav'ns, new Earth, Ages of endless date  
Founded in righteousness and peace and love . . .<sup>2</sup>

The final position of Adam with respect to knowledge (not as a resting-place, but as a plan of operation) is contained in these lines:

Greatly instructed I shall hence depart,  
Greatly in peace of thought, and have my fill  
Of knowledge, what this Vessel can contain;  
Beyond which was my folly to aspire.<sup>3</sup>

Adam is not to cease questioning and striving to discover the truth, but he is to question within limits which he understands and which are consonant with his nature. Peace of thought will henceforth coexist with intellectual curiosity, and he will not seek to overreach the bounds of what can be useful to him as a human being in a cosmic setting.

The following lines are among the most crucial in the epic, containing as they do what Milton apparently meant to be his closest approximation to a statement of the justification which he had promised his readers in the opening lines. He had already enunciated perhaps the crowning paradox of his poem in the amazed outcry of Adam, perplexed whether to repent or rejoice at what he has done. By this point in the epic Adam through the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 512-13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 549-50.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 557-60.

force of his own experience has come to appreciate the fact that everything from the structure of the universe down to his own daily acts is very different from what he had previously assumed. His nescience has guided him well. He is no longer the man he was in Book X, confident after the fall that he knew what it had entailed in terms of punishments for original sin. The epic had opened with the announced theme of man's disobedience, and now after the unheeded warnings and the 'mortal taste', we have come full circle to the promised justification and to what man has learned about obedience. When commanded to obey, both Satan and Eve (and after them Adam) had acted on the assumption that they knew not only what God had in mind but also what was best for them in response to His tyranny. Proof that this was not true, proof that they were nescient beings, emerged out of the complicated tangle of their disobedience. Now when Adam says, 'Henceforth I learn, that to obey is best', he is not supinely admitting that God is right, after all, just as Job's repenting in dust and ashes was no acknowledgement of a thoroughly cowed and beaten spirit. Both Adam and Job had learned something. What was this something and how does it emerge in the light of what we have seen of Milton's nescience, his stretching toward paradox, his conviction that truth must be lived out, and particularly his definition of heresy?

Critics have had no difficulty in recognizing that the morality of Eden (if indeed any morality was possible there) is very different from that of the postlapsarian world. Milton has underlined the difference by such prose statements as that in 'Areopagitica' in which he deplores a 'cloistered virtue', which has never been tested by confrontation with evil. After the fall such innocence was impossible, and it is the essence of Milton's conception of the fortunate fall that man in the state in which we know him has far greater potentialities for a rich moral life than if he were still in Eden. A similar kind of opposition to that between the Edenic and the post-Edenic may be discerned between two connotations of the word 'obedience'. On the one hand and corresponding to the Edenic state is the notion of blind obedience to authority



(the individual would become 'a heretic for the truth') on the assumption that man knows that what has been passed on to him as good and right is true and unquestionable. The obverse of this, springing from the same kind of dogmatism but with different goals, is blind disobedience, the disobedience of Satan and of Eve, who thought they knew God was insulting them and denying their right to know and who could be persuaded of no other point of view. Opposed to both of these is the kind of obedience which springs directly from nescience, the obedience which Adam has come to appreciate as a result of all that has happened to him. The person who has learned to obey in this sense does so precisely because he recognizes that he does not have all the answers. His obedience, therefore, represents a launching out into the unknown in the spirit of adventure and in the hope that what he has not been able to seize upon intellectually may be wrought out by the very force of his living. There is thus in Adam's decision that 'to obey is best' a kind of built-in device to prevent his ever becoming a heretic in Milton's sense of the word. The whole passage builds up through a succession of paradoxes to Adam's acceptance of Christ as his Redeemer in much the same sense as that in which Job longs for his Redeemer amid unhelpful friends, all of whom are themselves Miltonic heretics.

Henceforth I learn that to obey is best,  
 And love with fear the only God, to walk  
 As in his presence, ever to observe  
 His providence, and on him sole depend,  
 Merciful over all his works, with good  
 Still overcoming evil, and by small  
 Accomplishing great things, by things deem'd weak  
 Subverting worldly strong, and worldly wise  
 By simply meek; that suffering for Truth's sake  
 Is fortitude to highest victory,  
 And to the faithful Death the Gate of Life;  
 Taught this by his example whom I now  
 Acknowledge my Redeemer ever blest.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 561-73.

It is notable that the wisdom which Adam has now achieved came to him not as logical propositions but through the example of Christ, an example which Milton in *Paradise Regained* scrutinized carefully at the moment of temptation and so added further dimensions to a theme he had begun to treat in *Comus*. Thoroughly consistent with this approach is the ultimate shot in Milton's war against popery, which as a rigidly traditional system he considers the heresy of heresies: amend your lives.<sup>1</sup>

As if in explication of the sense in which he means the word 'obedience' to be used, Milton writes a speech for Michael which leaves no doubt of the fact that deeds constitute the final approach to truth and that therefore truth-seeking is a process which should continue as long as men have pulses upon which to prove what they have reached out toward.

This having learnt, thou hast attain'd the sum  
Of wisdom; hope no higher, though all the Stars  
Thou knew'st by name, and all th'ethereal Powers,  
All secrets of the deep, all Nature's works,  
Or works of God in Heav'n, Air, Earth, or Sea,  
And all the riches of this World enjoy'dst,  
And all the rule, one Empire; only add  
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith,  
Add Virtue, Patience, Temperance, add Love,  
By name to come call'd Charity, the soul  
Of all the rest: then wit thou not be loath  
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess  
A paradise within thee, happier far.<sup>2</sup>

In recapitulating the phases of Adam's struggle toward truth, these lines call up shadowy memories of Doctor Faustus and of Tamburlaine, both of whom as Renaissance men of *virtù* took the wrong road to achievement. It is finally clear, too, why the philosophizing angels in hell were doomed to failure by not being willing either to obey (as Adam now understands the word) or to go on to and through love-motivated action.

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Hanford, *John Milton, Englishman* (New York [1949]), pp. 247-8.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes ed., *op. cit.*, P. L., XII, 575-87.

The immediate reward, the building of a 'paradise within', stands half-way between the Edenic paradise and that promised at the second coming of Christ. It is consonant with Milton's Christian humanism that the focus is upon the 'paradise within'. That this is held out by Michael to Adam as a possible achievement somehow takes the stringency and bitterness away from the predestined course of man's history, as it had been outlined by Raphael. Just as the fortunate fall undercut the horror of original sin without dogmatically denying it, so the possibility of a paradise within makes the loaded scales of predestination almost irrelevant. This kind of paradise is built slowly and imperceptibly by people who, like the saved on the right hand side of the throne in Matthew's version of the Last Judgment, are not aware that 'by small' they are 'accomplishing great things'. They have been concerned only with what lay before them in daily life. They have been living out and living within their search for truth and thus catching glimpses of what at first seemed impossibly distant—the truth of God. Man's continual recognition of the distance between his thoughts and God's is his insurance against ever becoming the kind of heretic Milton deplored and thereby losing, by a far more serious fall than the first, his claim to the paradise within. Once that is lost, nothing remains except 'dull ease and cessation of knowledge',<sup>1</sup> than which Milton could imagine no blacker and more hopeless hell.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Areopagitica', p. 749.

# IV

## THE CAMBRIDGE PLATONISTS: IN TRANSITION



### I

It is well known that the English Romanticists, poets and prose writers alike, exhibited a deep-seated revulsion against the rationalistic oversimplification which had characterized their Augustan predecessors. Even Byron, whose sympathies were often with Pope, saw clearly the tremendous difference between Pope's brittle simplicity and the perhaps more complex simplicity of natural phenomena, of childhood, and of a life lived close to the power and beauty of sea and mountain. One culturally significant concomitant of this revulsion was the consistency with which many of these English Romantics gravitated toward their own poets and divines of the seventeenth century. It was probably the paradoxical and the oblique in their remote literary ancestors which attracted them as they turned away from the direct and rigidly ordered world of the Augustans. Blake and Coleridge come to mind first because their media made it possible for them to berate most effectively what they felt to be eighteenth-century impercipience, based fundamentally on an insensitivity to dualities. The criticism of Coleridge is shot through with his enthusiasm for the characteristic seventeenth-century grasp of paradox and with his rejection of the logical simplicity which flowered in satire and the closed couplet. Locke and Newton represented for Blake the arch-demons, and the violent swing away from them landed him in a veritable bramble patch of paradox but a bramble patch productive of exotically gorgeous flowers.

'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. . . . If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1948), p. 183.

Such paradoxes are in their tone reminiscent of Donne for the very good reason that they arise from a similar attitude toward human experience, resulting in the conviction that only by the clash of contraries which an outrageous statement generates can truth be adequately expressed. What intervenes between Donne and Blake, the realm of eighteenth-century rationalism, is not all of a piece, however, since there are no sharply delineated boundaries in the history of ideas. During this period the climate of opinion shades by almost unseen gradations from creative scepticism of various forms into a bleak simplicity of an almost uniform texture. By scrutinizing this transition one can gain a clearer picture of both its origins and its terminus: on the one hand the sceptic pattern (which near the end of the seventeenth-century was on its way out) and on the other the creeping rationalism, which first appears, quite innocently, as we shall see, in a symbiotic relationship with that scepticism.

The English literature which is most rewarding for an analysis of this kind is the work of the Cambridge Platonists. In the pronouncements of such men as Nathaniel Culverwel, Ralph Cudworth, Benjamin Whichcote, John Smith, and Henry More we can catch glimpses of that almost unnoticed shift from the rich and paradoxical kind of scepticism which has flourished throughout the Renaissance to a simple, devitalized, and two-dimensional brand which was in the eighteenth century to usurp the name of scepticism and retain only the deceptive shell from which the life had fled. (This is the historical reason why scepticism today is often mistakenly equated with dogmatic disbelief and so deprived of much of its multi-layered meaning.) The fact that the Cambridge men were unaware that this process was taking place and that the forces they were battling were slowly subduing them by an infiltrating manoeuvre, makes the whole campaign a most illuminating one for the historian of scepticism.

The Platonists of Emmanuel College, as generally viewed, represent a *cul de sac* in the history of philosophy because in

making their magnificent last-ditch stand against the materialism of Hobbes they were by-passed when the main current of British philosophy flowed down a channel dredged by simplifiers who, when confronted with a dualism, always chose one half and tried to define the other out of existence or to pretend it was not there. The Cambridge men, in contrast, remained for the most part and in their conscious intent sensitive to many paradoxes and extremely aware of the mystical in human experience. Ostensibly they thus refused to forswear any of the contradictory facts of life for the sake of clear, simple, and neat diagrams and explanations, such, for example, as would have been involved in concluding with Hobbes that the world is composed basically of matter. What happened was that their recognition of dualisms did not lead on, in sceptic fashion, to the complexities of paradox because of their passion for spiritual unity (what the Hindus call *advaita*). However, they were unwilling to buy such unity cheaply, and therefore they agonized over the pulling together of opposites. Because of the Platonists' anomalous manifestation of the sceptic pattern, it is perhaps easier to understand sympathetically the genesis of eighteenth-century rationalism by investigating what went on in the Emmanuel backwaters than by disregarding the Platonists and following the main stream. It was ironical that they were, in a way, of the main stream without knowing it or rather that they were carriers of a recessive element destined to undermine their central position when it became dominant in the Augustans.

A recognition of this anomalous situation is to be found in S. L. Bethell's *The Cultural Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, where in elaborating the Elizabethan concept of reason as involving 'an intuitive apprehension of the "forms"', he concludes that 'There is more mysticism about the reason of the Elizabethans than [about] the Augustans' faith'.<sup>1</sup> Thus he lays bare the contrast between the two groups in the very spirit in which we shall be considering it. Faith to the Augustans, like reason, was never something complicated or mystical while both the faith and the

<sup>1</sup> (London, 1951), p. 64.

reason whose reconciliation progressively exercised Elizabethan and Jacobean thinking had about them more than met the eye. Of course, the two were not for this reason to be confused and could be clearly distinguished in practice by the opposite directions of their respective thrusts. This opposition created a persistent tension for the Renaissance man whereas for the Augustan there was a simple explanation of the relationship of faith and reason: only a reasonable faith was acceptable. The unique position of the Cambridge Platonists, between Jacobeans and Augustans, gives us an opportunity to observe the afterglow of one way of thought and its overshadowing by things to come, which after the creative stresses of the previous century settled down into the kind of lethargic simplicity which the Romantic revolution was destined in time to disrupt. The men of Emmanuel provided both the stimulus for the powerful if decorous Augustan reaction and, in spite of themselves, maintained a kind of forcing bed for the simpler and simpler ideas which would finally undermine their essentially sceptical position as those ideas were promulgated by the Augustans. The elements deriving from the Platonists which turn up in Romanticism and so relate that movement in its essential nature to the scepticism of the Elizabethans constitute an important ideological bridge. In the history of Western thought the ideas of the Platonists span a gap (some would say a dry river bed or an abyss of the wasteland) on the hither side of which stretch out the fertile plains of the American branch of Romanticism, known as Transcendentalism, and the receding horizon of modern continental Existentialism.

The heritage which the Cambridge Platonists received from their predecessors in the seventeenth century was very similar to that which they were to transmit to their descendants; but it is the slight and almost negligible differences between the two (negligible until one has looked at them carefully in the perspective of history) which are significant, especially in view of the ensuing development of thought in England during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The dominant thought-pattern of many outstanding thinkers of the late Renaissance has been de-

scribed as creative scepticism inasmuch as it followed a clearly definable sequence (traceable also in the Greek and Roman sceptics) including an emphasis upon, if not a bewailing of, man's nescience, a concern with dualisms and with their reconciliation and therefore a stressing of polarity and of paradox as the only invulnerable formulation of truth, and action as the obverse of paradox and what might almost be called its non-intellectual correlative. What one could not rationally puzzle out (because of man's inescapable nescience) might be lived out, and by doing one might come at last to know. Such action-won knowledge would exhibit the same character as that anticipated beyond the last great day and would therefore contrast markedly with the kind of knowledge men claimed for themselves in this life. It has been demonstrated that although some seventeenth-century thinkers stressed one of these elements and some another, a cross-section of the thought of the century would show a fairly even stress on all of them, at least sufficient to constitute a trend. One critic, for example, has characterized Milton's kind of creative scepticism by describing thus his confronting the problem of whether or not man would have been better off if he had not succumbed in the Garden of Eden.

'Milton cannot solve the difficulty in an entirely rational manner, and his insistence on the Fortunate Fall represents something of a supra-rational, Pascalian leap, an attempt to knot by paradox the strands whose conflicting pull allows no other reconciliation.'<sup>1</sup>

The attempt to force some other reconciliation apparently did not occur to Milton's realistic mind, but it obsessed the whole century following. Milton's poetry represented the flowering in the seventeenth century of the ancient tree of scepticism, whose roots reached deeply into Greek and Roman thought and whose lower branches had produced both Nicholas of Cusa and Montaigne.

When one arrives at the Cambridge Platonists near the end of

<sup>1</sup> M. M. Mahood, *Poetry and Humanism* (London, 1950), p. 248.



the seventeenth century, there is a noticeable difference in emphasis from that to be found earlier—a diminished awareness of and lamentation concerning man's nescience and a strong tendency when reconciling dualisms to end up with something less tense and quivering than paradox. In other words, the conflicts and stresses within man's soul and between him and God are somehow mitigated or glossed over, and there is an increased emphasis upon the integrity of man and upon his oneness with God. In the reconciling of dualisms, it often seems (in spite of a whole-hearted opposition to Hobbes and his method) as if one half of a dualism had swallowed the other, and the result is a calmness of tone and a deceptive simplicity which men like John Donne and Richard Baxter and Thomas Browne had never known. Their intellectual alighting-places were always occupied tentatively and merely marked the stages in a journey, whereas the Platonists give one a sense of settling down and laying the foundation for a building, even when they pay lip-service to a kind of intellectual nomadism for which they proved not to have been temperamentally fitted.

One of the most striking examples of their de-emphasis upon struggle and paradox is to be found in their reaction toward the irrationality and the arbitrariness of Calvinism. More than one of them had 'bid John Calvin good-night', and the reason appears to have been that they could not rationally reconcile themselves to an unpredictable God. He too, they felt, like man, must be guided by immutable moral law, which man can read by looking into the depths of his own soul. Even though Calvinists can certainly not be equated in all respects with seventeenth-century creative sceptics, the two groups share a sturdy fearlessness in the face of paradox which somehow was not maintained in its original strength to the end of the century. What was lost here psychologically was something in the earlier scepticism which took into account man's tragic experience of the disparity between his ways and God's. The conflicting strands referred to by Mahood above in connection with Milton were slowly being unknotted—with resultant losses and gains which we shall try to assess as we look

in detail at the variety of scepticism which appears in the thought of the Platonists.

## II

Nescience plays such a minor role in the experience of these men (as we shall see in Culverwel's analysis of the elements of scepticism)<sup>1</sup> that it will suffice to consider it only incidentally as it relates to some other phase of their thought. It is, therefore, with the reconciling of opposites (not always preceded by a genuine struggle) that the Platonists begin to elaborate the sceptic pattern; indeed, reconciliation is a key word for them.

What, first of all, did they make of the most basic dualism, spirit and matter? The Platonists shared with their Renaissance predecessors a concern with epistemology, with what men know and how they know it, and consequently with the answer to the question: what is the world, essentially, spirit or matter? In trying to maintain what they instinctively felt as the reality of spirit, they often joined such creative sceptics as Baxter and Glanvill in believing in witches, not because they were bent on persecuting their fellow-creatures but because they felt that to relinquish a belief in evil spirits would lead to their losing a belief in all spirits and hence to their descent into materialism, for which they so berated Hobbes. The generation immediately preceding them had been deeply impressed by Descartes and his *Cogito, ergo sum* but also by his ingenious invention of the term 'animal spirits' in order to bridge the gap between body and soul. It was these to which Donne referred in 'The Extasie' when, after puzzling over man's being composed of both elements, he struck out the phrase 'that subtle knot, which makes us man'. Among the Platonists, Henry More, often an extremist and a literalist, goes so far as to locate these animal spirits in the fourth ventricle of the brain<sup>2</sup>; but John Smith interprets them more in the spirit of Descartes when he says that until the knot is unloosed which binds soul to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *infra*, pp. 163 ff.

<sup>2</sup> John Tulloch, *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London, 1874), II, 391.

body, whatever affects one will necessarily be transmitted to the other since 'our nerves are distended with the animal spirits'.<sup>1</sup> Smith's primitive physiology points backward to the theory of the humours and forward to the modern development of psychosomatic medicine.

Cudworth, too, carried on Descartes' way of thought when he spoke of 'plastic natures' which bound together spirit and matter.

'His plastic natures are a sort of "third man" designed to bridge the gap between God and matter, mind and body; they are "reason immersed and plunged into matter and, as it were, fuddled in it and confounded with it".'<sup>2</sup>

The plasticity of these 'natures' distinguishes them from the almost mathematically conceived animal spirits, which reflect what the Platonists considered to be the cold and mechanical cleavage between thought and extension. They conceived of the Divine as somehow an indwelling spiritual power and saw all of nature shot through with His presence. Henry More, ever the reconciler of opposites, exhibiting nothing of the *Zerissenheit* of some of his sceptic predecessors, is shocked by the traditional opposition of spirit and matter. 'It seems not so probable to me that nature admits of so great a chasm.'<sup>3</sup> In line with this assumption, Cudworth's 'plastic natures' represent spirit 'inactuating' matter so that somehow the whole world takes on the quality of spirit, but of an expanded spirit—not that which could serve as the mere antithesis of matter but as something 'fuddled', in matter and hence awakening it to life, just like the Shakti in Hindu thought. The word 'vitalism' has been used by Pawson to designate More's avoidance of a choice between spirit and matter by making a 'close correlation' between the two.

As he confronts another and perhaps less basic dualism, that of stasis and mobility, John Smith illustrates very concisely the

<sup>1</sup> John Smith, *Select Discourses* . . . (London, 1660), p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Passmore, *Ralph Cudworth, an Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1951), p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Tulloch, *op. cit.*, 'The Immortality of the Soul', II, 394.

technique which was employed by the Platonists in integrating opposites without the result's being what Coleridge would call a 'rum-toddy' or unhomogenized combination. Smith has been describing with great eloquence the state of the truly religious man and his oneness with God. In the course of this description he has been trying to demonstrate that true religion is not static but is a progressive force which moves on toward perfection. The trap to avoid here is that of opting for either mobility or repose to the exclusion of the other. With great perspicacity and a deep understanding of the necessity of living if one is to know, Smith manages to combine the two in an organic fashion, making skilful use of his own brand of typology—the life-jacket of many a theologian in distress.

'As Christ was in his *Bodily appearance*, he was still increasing in wisdom and knowledge and favour with God and man, untill he was perfected in glory; so is he also in his *Spiritual appearance* in the Souls of men; and accordingly the New Testament does more than once distinguish of Christ in his several ages and degrees of growth in the Souls of all true Christians. Good men are always walking on from strength to strength, till at last they see God in Zion. Religion, though it hath its infancy, yet it hath no old age: while it is in its Minority, it is always *in motu*; but when it comes to its Maturity and full age, it will always be *in quiete*, it is then always the same, and its years fail not, but it shall endure for ever.'<sup>1</sup>

To have stressed either aimless and endless movement or the deceptive quietude of premature conclusions would have been to ignore half the facts. Perhaps because he did not do this, Smith illustrates Powicke's contention that the men of Emmanuel, with rare discrimination, eschewed the 'dogmatism of the Calvinistic principle' and developed, instead, its 'latent progressive impulse'.<sup>2</sup> This was done, as we can see, by manipulating both movement and quietude without letting either of them go.

<sup>1</sup> E. T. Campagnac, *The Cambridge Platonists* (Oxford, 1901), pp. 198-9.

<sup>2</sup> F. J. Powicke, *The Cambridge Platonists, a Study* (London, 1926), p. 6.

If we turn from this technique to objective evidence of a historical kind, we discover that the two non-utilitarian movements in British ethics, rationalism and sentimentalism, both stem from the philosophical speculation of the Cambridge Platonists. Similarly, one can begin to understand Socrates by investigating the schools of thought into which Greek philosophy bifurcated after his death. The rationalists took over from their tutors 'the conception of an eternal and immutable morality' and the sentimentalists an 'emphasis upon goodness as distinct from duty, upon ways of life as distinct from obedience to creeds'.<sup>1</sup> Both of these elements must have inhered in the rich philosophical springs of Emmanuel.

In addition to reconciling opposites (spirit and matter, movement and quiet, sentimentalism and rationalism), we find the Platonists contributing most strikingly to removing the barriers between the divine and the human and between reason and faith. In contrast to the tempestuous inner conflicts reflected in much seventeenth-century poetry and prose, these men assumed confidently the continuum of the divine and the human. Whereas both High Church ritualists and Puritan dogmatists felt they were exalting God by setting Him apart from man (in the chalice and bread upon the altar or in a doctrine about the Saviour), the Platonists considered man's experience in its highest reaches of morality to be his only pathway to the Divine, just as many modern Existentialists conceive of the good as built up slowly by an accretion of ethical decisions. The process, according to Tulloch, was one of 'divinising the moral, not humanising the divine'.

'The Divine may, no doubt, be conceived apart from its human manifestations in the higher spiritual instincts of our race—but we can know nothing of it, save in these manifestations. Spirit can only live in spirit, can only be known by spirit. We can only find God in ourselves. The roots of the divine and the human are

<sup>1</sup> Passmore, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

inseparable; and if we try to tear them asunder, we plunge . . . into materialism. . . .<sup>1</sup>

One gets the image not of two elements, the divine and the human, which have been unaccountably shoved together but of two which could never have been separated except by forcible wrenching, and the price of such wrenching was the materialism which the Platonists were pledged to destroy. It is understandable then that John Smith should have described 'the soul of religion in good men' as operating to increase their stature and to expand their scope in the direction of God.

'The nearer any Being comes to God, who is that Infinite fullness that fills all in all the more *vast* and *large* and *unbounded* it is; as the further it slides from him, the more it is *streightned* & *confined*.' . . .<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this is why Augustine, who had much in common with the Platonists and the creative sceptics, attributed man's restlessness to his moving away from God.

Nevertheless, when we note how far Smith carried this idea, we understand why some people have been shocked by the Platonists, people who have come upon their doctrines without previous preparation. Smith, in spite of all opposition, pursues his idea to its logical conclusion and is not daunted by the position at which he has arrived.

'It were not worth the while to have been born or to live, had it been only for such a *penurious End* as our selves are: It is most God-like and best suits with the Spirit of Religion, for a Christian to live wholly to God, to live the life of God, *having his own life hid with Christ in God*; and thus in a sober sense he becomes *Deified*. This indeed is such a *theowis Deification* as is not transacted merely upon the stage of *Fancy* by Arrogance and Presump-

<sup>1</sup> Tulloch, *op. cit.*, II, 469.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 394.

tion, but in the highest Powers of the Soul by a living and quickening Spirit of true Religion there uniting God and the Soul together in the *Unity of Affections, Will and End.*<sup>1</sup>

The creative sceptic often finds himself, as here, in a position where he must draw fine distinctions between two incompatible meanings of a single phrase and must therefore risk the most serious misunderstanding. The Platonists were willing to face this danger for the sake of truth, even though to do so often meant for them false charges from 'the hot men of the several extreams'.

The unusual interpretation which they gave, for example, to the phrase 'the glory of God' indicates at once the dangers to which they exposed themselves and the strength of their convictions concerning the oneness of man and God.

'We rather *glorifie* God by entertaining the Impressions of his Glory upon us, then by communicating any kind of Glory to him. Then does a Good man become the Tabernacle of God wherein the Divine *Schechinah* does rest, and which the Divine glory fills, when the frame of his Mind and Life is wholly according to that Idea and Pattern which he receives from the Mount.'<sup>2</sup>

If man glorifies God by taking the impress of God and becoming like him in action, it necessarily follows that in this state he has achieved his highest happiness. Such a state insures his solidarity with all that is real in the universe, whether in man or in nature. No longer does he reach for what is beyond him; rather, he realizes for the first time what is within him, just as Emerson and the Transcendentalists were to do later. Again, the knowledge which comes by doing, always the final aim of the sceptic, is of the same character as that heavenly knowledge which crowns man's earthly career.

'*Heaven* is not a thing without us, nor is Happiness any thing distinct from a true Conjunction of the Mind with God in a secret

<sup>1</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

feeling of his Goodness and reciprocation of affection to him, wherein the Divine Glory most unfolds it self. And there is nothing that a Soul touch'd with any serious sense of God can more earnestly thirst after or seek with more strength of affection then This. Then shall we be happy, when God comes to be all in all in us.<sup>1</sup>

If this represents the ideal toward which man strives and his highest fulfilment, he must not have been left by a loving God without clues in nature which would lead him on toward his high calling. Those who are ready to cry Pantheism at the slightest intimation of the immanence of God must make the most of the words of Whichcote:

'Every creature is a line leading to God, so that we cannot miss Him. For the heavens declare the glory of God, and every grass in the field reveals Him.'<sup>2</sup>

The God who is thus revealed, according to one of the Platonists' primary postulates, is, as we have seen, that essence of goodness manifested to man in the most exalted of his moral actions. Cudworth made it clear in his sermon to the House of Commons that wherever such holiness dwells, there is a bit of God. For this reason the holy is invincible.

'It is in league with God, and the whole universe; the whole creation smiles upon it: there is something of God in it, and therefore it must needs be, a victorious and triumphant thing.'<sup>3</sup>

Such strong support for nature mysticism and for the righteousness of the universe was not lost later upon the Romantics.

It is illuminating to set alongside the spirit of these quotations

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> Powicke, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Cudworth, *A Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons at Westminster* (Cambridge, 1647), p. 69.



that which underlies a poem such as Donne's Holy Sonnet 'Batter my heart, three-personed God'. Both Donne and the Platonists achieved a union of opposites, but Donne's, arising out of struggle, was achieved by means of paradox so that the agitation of conflicting forces turned into the steady hum of some higher harmony while the Platonists' represented a far-flung subsumption in which all conflict was quieted, indeed, in the presence of which it became irrelevant. Among them there is nothing of the tone underlying Donne's

... for I

Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste unless Thou ravish me.

There is the quality of an alternating current of electricity about these lines, in striking contrast to the direct current generated by the Platonists, a current in which there is no break between God, man, and the universe. This distinction may not seem to be a tremendously important one, but the smooth transition and the lack of the slightest conflict between man and his God or between man and his universe signalizes a very different approach to unity from that which characterized the earlier creative sceptics, and in this difference lies the clue to what was happening to scepticism at the hands of the Cambridge Platonists.

An inevitable corollary to this oneness of man and God is represented in the central figure by which the Platonists are identified, that of 'the candle of the Lord'. 'The Spirit of man', they had read in Proverbs, 'is the candle of the Lord', and this figure characterized perfectly their sense of the oneness of man and God—and implied, in addition, that man by this relationship had an immediate access to truth if he could but learn how to take advantage of it. Culverwel, in writing his *Discourse of the Light of Nature*, significantly translated 'spirit of man' into 'understanding of man' and hence made his contribution to the long series of epistemological theories over which the mind of Renaissance man had agonized. He talks about 'some seeds of light' which are 'scattered in the soul of man'. Thence arise 'all the fresh

springs of common and fountain-notions' which refresh this 'garden of God'. Nothing that the wickedness of man can do will have any ultimate effect upon this light, these seeds, these springs.

'They may pull off *Natures leaves*, and pluck off her *fruits*, and chop off her *branches*, but yet the *root* of it is eternal, the foundation of it is *inviolable*.'<sup>1</sup>

This, of course, follows immediately from the concept of the oneness of man and God. As Whichcote puts it in one of his aphorisms,

'*The Spirit of a Man is the Candle of the Lord; Lighted by God and Lighting us to God. Res illuminata, illuminans.*'<sup>2</sup>

As happens probably more often than those of us who trace 'influences' imagine, the Platonists seized upon this scriptural passage because it expressed with symbolic overtones (which may be more important than most philosophers are willing to admit) what they had already concluded to be the relationship between man and God. As Powicke says,

'Their love for that particular phrase may have arisen, certainly not from the feeling that it was their only scriptural support, but from the humility which led them to confess that the glory of knowing the truth is coupled with the fact that man's knowledge, and power to know, do not, at least on earth, amount to very much; is comparatively a feeble light, a mere beam in darkness. All the same, its divine origin and character confer upon it a divine authority, so far as it goes.'<sup>3</sup>

Here is the way the Platonists handled nescience. They did not spend a disproportionate amount of time lamenting it but

<sup>1</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Powicke, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

maturely accepted it as an inevitable handicap of man but one which, nevertheless, did not invalidate such illumination of the darkness as his God-lit candle shed. He must not set his knowledge up to vie with God's in the Heaven-storming manner of the man of *virtù* whom Marlowe was fond of depicting, but he must live by such light as God has vouchsafed him, be grateful for this, and recognize in its divine origins the promise of ultimate wisdom. This attitude would necessarily prepare the mind of the Platonist to recognize and hail the truth, no matter where he found it. Says Whichcote,

'*Truth is truth*' whosoever hath spoken it, or howsoever it hath been abused.<sup>1</sup>

As we shall see later in more detail, this is a sound foundation for tolerance of all opinions, however they may seem to be skewed from the line of God's truth as we happen to conceive it. Culverwel would esteem 'a *Pearl* in the *head* of an *Heathen*, some *Jewels* hid in the *rubbish* of *Nations*. . . . To mix the light of their *Candle* with that *light*, which comes *shining* from the *Candle* of an *Heathen*, is no disparagement to Jew nor Christian.'<sup>2</sup> Man is to gather for his own illumination all the light possible, from no matter what candle it shines, instead of defending the constricted revelation of his own small torch against that of another man. Light transcends the pitting of one candle-circle against another; is in fact increased by adding them. Here again (and perhaps as a substitute for intense nescience) is something on which to exercise man's humility. Culverwel, making us think of Mahood's comparison between Elizabethan reason and Augustan faith, calls this Light reason and equates it with the Logos of the fourth gospel and with the 'Christ within' of the Quakers. Had the fall never taken place, Smith argues, man could have worked out for himself all the truths which God had planted within him—thus the religion of nature; but because of the fall, it is necessary for

<sup>1</sup> J. Bass Mullinger, *The University of Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1911), III, 593.

<sup>2</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

man to supplement his natural endowment with the truth of revelation.

It is precisely at this point that we must look for an explanation of the attitude of the Platonists toward the reason-faith controversy of their day. The fuller use one makes of the light of reason, they held, the better prepared he will be to receive the truths of revelation, which by their very origin can in no way contradict reason. The reader gets the impression from arguments such as this that the Platonists are viewing this central problem of their century in great perspective instead of myopically seeking to protect vested interests. Their chief concern seems to be that God shall not be made out to be schizophrenic or a liar by our accusing Him of requiring man to believe what is contradicted by the reason which God has given him. To oppose reason to the sacred writings, says Burnet,<sup>1</sup> is to oppose God to Himself. Culverwel insists that it is blasphemy to say that God or His Word could ever oppose right reason.<sup>2</sup> The role of reason he describes as that of recognizing its own limitations and, as a rational consequence, stooping, as Thomas Browne would say, 'unto the lure of faith'. 'One light', Culverwel concludes, 'does not oppose another.'<sup>3</sup> And then he goes on to reinforce his argument with other well-chosen figures, for example, that of the 'prospective glass' which extends but does not oppose the vision of the eye. (Again, note the smoothness of the transition here from eye to glass, with not the least break, only constant magnification, in perception.) Such, he concludes, is the relationship between reason and faith.

'... and can the Fountain of *Love* and *Unity* send forth any *irreconcilable streams*? Do you think that God did ever intend to divide a rational Being, to tear and rend a Soul in *pieces*, to scatter *Principles of discord and confusion* in it? If God be pleased to open some *other passage* in the soul, and to give it another Eye, does that *prejudice* the former? ... The most that Man's Reason can do, is to fill the Understanding to the brim; but *Faith*, that throws

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Burnet, *The Theory of the Earth* . . . , 2nd ed. (London, 1691), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

the *Soul* into the *Ocean*, and lets it *roll*, and *bath* it self in the *vastnesse* and *fulnesse* of a *Deity*.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction here is a real one but lacking in genuine opposition or any tension. Culverwel calls upon Pico della Mirandola to witness that faith itself enables the reason to assent to revealed truths. It is the function of reason, he says, to delight in common notions, those which are its natural heritage, as it is the function of faith to embrace revelation. The lights of both reason and scripture have been vouchsafed man, Whichcote says in an aphorism, and he must 'suffer neither to be put out'.<sup>2</sup> The problem here is one of conservation rather than of reconciliation. There is no bitterness of struggle. A heart-breaking puzzle has been solved by sleight-of-hand.

Broadminded as the Platonists were about seizing upon the truth wherever they found it, even among the heathen, there was one scripture and one revelation (the Christian) which they believed stood out above all the others, and it achieved this eminence because of its compatibility with reason. It was the prime purpose of Henry More to 'demonstrate the rationality of the Christian religion throughout. . . . For take away reason, and all religions are alike true; as the light being removed, all things are of one colour.'<sup>3</sup> Christianity, therefore, interpreted as the Platonists interpret it, is held to be the only religion which can survive the test of reason. Edward Fowler, in *The Principles and Practices of Certain Moderate Divines of the Church of England*, setting forth some of his ideas in dialogue form, makes a defender of Christianity say that if it were legitimate to believe the tenets of one's religion without regard to reason, the door would be open to the most absurd of beliefs. He might, under those conditions, as well be a 'Mahometan' as a Christian.

'But I am so far from imagining that reason hath nothing to do in religion, that I am most assured, that it is nowhere to so good purpose employed as it is there.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>2</sup> Tulloch, *op. cit.*, III, 113.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 353, 354.

<sup>4</sup> (London, 1670), p. 42.

George Rust goes further into an analysis of what happens when the believer leaves reason out of account, and in doing so gives a perfect example of how the Platonists' love of reason led them gradually to relinquish their sensitivity to the paradoxical, to the absurd, in their enthusiasm for oneness and wholeness.

'And he that can persuade himself that he believes a thing that he does not understand, believes he knows not what; and miserably imposes upon himself with a company of words prettily put together, and giving a great sound, which yet have no conceptions answering to them in the mind, and while he dreams of believing some unintelligible mystery, he only pursues mere shadows of words from which when the veil is withdrawn, a faith and sense presently vanishes.'<sup>1</sup>

The danger here, to be noted in passing, is that such criticism might be levelled equally against the man who believes irresponsibly and him whose belief reaches far out beyond his clear and distinct ideas into a realm toward which the furthest out-thrusts of paradox only point the way. It is enough, however, for our purposes at the moment to stress the Platonists' solution of the reason-faith controversy: their notion that there can be no ultimate conflict between the two, just as there can be none between man and God. All is a shining and glorious oneness in whose presence struggle becomes irrelevant because it is unreal. Man may set his foot upon the path to this glory by making the utmost use of his God-given reason, and if he should yet miss his final goal, he is more to be respected than one who abandons reason for a pseudo-faith.

'Nay certain it is, that he who after an humble, pious, and attentive weighing of things shall yet fall into error, is upon better grounds to be judged if not worthy of praise, yet at least of pardon

<sup>1</sup> George Rust, *A Discourse of the Use of Reason in Matters of Religion*, tr. Hen. Hallywell (London, 1683), p. 26.

than he that shall blindly and fortuitously assent, though to truth it self. To which the Holy Writings bear witness, by commanding us to search the scriptures; to prove all things; and to examine and try the spirits. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

One can hear Rust agreeing with Milton's definition of the heretic. It is significant that for the Platonists, as for Milton, the process by which truth was arrived at was just as important as the truth itself. He who climbed up 'some other way' was a thief and a robber. To have lost one's way on the right road was more pardonable than to have arrived by the wrong one. Perhaps it is in conclusions like these that the Platonists paid wistful tribute to the paradoxes from which they were moving away. It is just here, however, when one pauses to reflect that only the compatibility of reason and faith is being emphasized and never their incompatibility that one becomes suspicious of the goal toward which all this is moving.

Although the Platonists would not relinquish their belief in the superiority of the Christian religion, they did recognize the difference between the righteous heathen and the unrighteous Christian. Says Whichcote,

'The *Good-nature* of an Heathen is more God-like than the furious *Zeal* of a Christian.'<sup>2</sup>

It was Montaigne who had said, 'There is no hostility so excellent as that which is absolutely Christian'.<sup>3</sup> Cudworth seems to be expanding and setting forth the psychological implications of this aphorism when he tells the House of Commons,

'Let us take heed we do not sometimes call that zeal for God and his gospel which is nothing else but our own tempestuous and

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Essays of Montaigne*, tr. John Florio (New York; London 1948), Everyman ed., II, 132.

stormy passion. . . . True Zeal is a loving thing, and makes us always active to edification, and not to destruction.'<sup>1</sup>

It is further demonstrated here that the Platonists' care in distinguishing between words is not a mere semantic idiosyncrasy but an attempt to describe and warn against the true behaviour of men and particularly their tendency to utilize words to gloss over that behaviour or to make it seem other than it is.

To recapitulate, in relating the Cambridge Platonists to the sceptic pattern, we have thus far seen them touching rather lightly and incidentally upon nescience and putting their principal emphasis upon reconciling spirit and matter, stasis and movement, the rational and the sentimental, God and man, reason and faith. It is hard to realize after listening to their warm yet reasonable and persuasive arguments that these dualisms were ever the source of spiritual anguish either in the seventeenth century or in any other.

### III

For the Platonists the second most important element in the pattern of creative scepticism, after the reconciling of opposites, is the conviction that knowledge comes as a result of action. As Plotinus said, 'If thou beest it, thou seest it.'<sup>2</sup> The old epistemological conundrum was still uppermost in their minds, and they were convinced that in order to achieve the truth one must supplement his use of reason by the living of a good life. Coleridge was later quite in accord with the spirit of the Platonists when he distrusted words, often the precipitate of reasoning, and insisted they were not the end products but only the vehicle of truth. Cudworth told the House of Commons that divine truths are of such a nature that they can never be 'congealed into ink' nor 'blotted upon paper'. He refers nostalgically to the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians as having the advantage of lying closer to action than do our alphabets.

<sup>1</sup> Cudworth, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Powicke, *op. cit.*, p. 47.



'The life of divine truths is better expressed in actions than in words, because actions are more living things than words; words are nothing but the dead resemblances and pictures of those truths which live and breathe in actions: and the kingdom of God (as the Apostle speaketh, consisteth not in word, but in life and power.'<sup>1</sup>

The Platonists, like their predecessors in the century but with even greater emphasis, put a premium upon action as a means of combating a tendency to over-intellectualize and to conclude that man can answer by a mere formula the burning questions of his existence and his salvation. The result was to prevent men's coming to rest in a codified system of conclusions and to remind them that the search for truth is a moving, never-ending process. (Yet we have also seen them, in their role as sceptics, lauding as sincerely an eternal and immutable morality and the quiet of a mature religious life.) Cudworth does his best to warn the House of Commons against the static and the orthodox by condemning the non-progressive religion of the Calvinists,

'... as if Religion were nothing else but a dancing up and down upon the same piece of ground and making several motions and friskings on it; and not a sober journeying and travelling on-wards toward some certain place.'<sup>2</sup>

In addition to valuing process, as we have before noted, above conclusion, Cudworth here emphasizes, unlike dogmatic religionists, the adventure of truth-seeking, whose goal has about it the certainty of the eternal, albeit man may conceive it differently from time to time and may discover as he nears it that it does not conform to his preconception.

If man cannot by taking thought know either God or the world, the Platonists argued, it may be only through the exercise of his will that he can reach such knowledge. From the Neo-Platonists

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

they had heard about three avenues to truth—'purposive action, reasoning thought, and loving affection'.<sup>1</sup> When the most obvious way, reason, led to an impasse, they were eager to try the others and found themselves richly rewarded. They realized that living produced insight and that insight, in turn, led to higher living. John Smith hailed 'the display of contemplation and action, . . . in which wisdom consists.'

'Action is the ritual of contemplation, as the dialectic is its creed. The conduct of life rests on an act of faith which begins as an experiment and ends as an experience.'<sup>2</sup>

Into these words, reminiscent of Existentialist pronouncements, are packed the chief elements of creative scepticism: the tentative quality of its approach, implying nescience; the dualism and paradox implicit in dialectic; and an overwhelming emphasis upon first-hand experience, unfiltered through the medium of words, as a prime teacher of wisdom. Elsewhere Smith commends an 'inward acquaintance' with virtue and goodness, the result of an exercise of will, and contrasts with it 'a naked demonstration'. To rely upon the latter alone to transmit knowledge is like describing colours to a blind man.<sup>3</sup> To Smith, God is not only 'the Eternal Reason' but also the 'Supreme Good which our Wills are always catching after',<sup>4</sup> prepared as we are to recognize it by the faint reflection which we bear within but more often lamenting its absence than illuminated by its presence.

Since the Platonists are so fond of reiterating the gospel injunction to do the will of God if one would know of Him, they are full of scorn for those who, like the Calvinists (they feel), put some other concern above this one. Instead of trying to pry into the secrets of their salvation or damnation, such men are advised to align their wills with God's and are assured that they will find God's verdict on their failure or success written in their own breasts.

<sup>1</sup> Powicke, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

'The best assurance that any one can have of his interest in God is doubtless the conformity of his soul to him.'<sup>1</sup>

Very much in the spirit of Donne's 'hands, not tongues, end heresies', the Platonists eschew the theological posturing of their contemporaries as cold and lifeless when compared to 'the holiness of our hearts and lives'.<sup>2</sup> This is the underpinning of truth in the world, and what we are can affect it much more seriously than how we argue. In this same vein, Jeremy Taylor asks whether a vicious habit is not as bad as or worse than a false opinion, especially since the definition of heresy is so uncertain. Whichcote in his *Aphorisms* goes so far as to say that

'Nothing is desperate in the condition of good men; they will not live and die in any dangerous error.'<sup>3</sup>

More reinforces this by saying of mystic experiences that holiness is 'the only safe entrance into divine knowledge'.<sup>4</sup>

Since we have seen that the Platonists recognize no opposition between faith and reason, it is understandable that for them the living of a good life is the road not only to knowledge but also to belief. The body of a man's beliefs, they feel (with that passion for oneness which characterizes all their thought), is always an unerring reflection of the quality of his life. 'It is not imaginable', says Whichcote, 'that any man can believe contrary to the life he lives in. . . .'<sup>5</sup> Cudworth reminds the House of Commons that a man who subscribes to all the articles of Christian belief and denies Christ in his life is not as true a Christian as he who follows the light of his own conscience, even though he never has heard of Christ.<sup>6</sup> Again and again the Platonists insist that Jesus did not establish a system of beliefs but tried to promote in men a right

<sup>1</sup> Cudworth, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Tulloch, *op. cit.*, II, 103.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>5</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> W. R. Scott, *An Introduction to Cudworth's Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* . . . (London, 1891). p. 8.

life as the only pathway to faith. Fowler traces the decay of Christianity from its early concern with 'temper and spirit' to its later stress upon orthodoxy and ceremonies, and concludes that men have quite forgotten 'the great end and design of Christ's gospel.'<sup>1</sup>

It follows from this that no important religious concept can be set apart from man and the life he lives. For example, divinity is defined by Smith as 'rather . . . a divine life than a divine science',<sup>2</sup> and it becomes increasingly difficult as one reads on to separate 'a divine life' from the sum of the blissful moments that man painfully accumulates each day through the trial and error of his own experience. Finally our very conception of God Himself is linked indissolubly to what man is. 'Such as men themselves are, such will God himself seem to be.'<sup>3</sup> This living the life of God is very reminiscent of the doctrine widespread among Sufi poets that the great man sees with God's eyes, works with his hands, thinks with his mind, and loves with his heart and that if God is to realize himself in history, it will have to be through the men who thus by the farthest reaches of their ethical thrusts push forward and outward the spiritual frontiers of the race. The Platonists see God and man as bound so closely together that a man is incapable of conceiving of a God who does not correspond, albeit on another plane, to the outlines of his own character.

'That which a man approves and allows in himself, he will attribute and ascribe unto God. No ill-natured people think well of God.'<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, as Whichcote says elsewhere,

'The mind that doth contemplate God, must be God-like. 'Tis only the quiet and serene mind that can contemplate God, and enjoy him: for God will not dwell where violence and fury is.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fowler, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Whichcote, *Select Sermons* . . . (London, 1698), p. 388.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

Such pronouncements might seem, to the shallow and unimaginative, to constitute a vicious circle—one cannot reach God until one has purified his own soul, and yet the God whom he reaches will necessarily bear the colouring of that very soul. But the truth is that they merely reinforce the conception we have noted before, that everything which exists is linked and intertwined, and that the higher the plane on which one lives, the greater one's awareness of the truth—if, indeed, one is not helping to create and expand it.

## IV

Of the many far-flung corollaries of these central theorems of the Platonists, let us look at only two. One, which is developed principally by Whichcote, is that religion promotes what we should today call mental health. He is remarkably percipient about the interrelation of body and mind (never having felt them to be separate entities), and much in the vein of today's speculations about psycho-somatic phenomena he describes both the ravages wrought upon the body by a tortured soul and the bodily health that flows from spiritual peace and joy. Perhaps remembering the many dour religionists he had known, Whichcote preaches the Platonists' kind of Christianity as a great promoter of 'the Mind's Health and good Temper' as well as of 'the Bodies Strength'.<sup>1</sup> 'Religion', he says, 'causeth the greatest serenity and cheerfulness to the mind . . .'.<sup>2</sup> and has been given man in order to improve not only his future state but his present—'the Soul's Safety, the Bodies better Security'.<sup>3</sup> Faith in God and conformity to his will, he explains, act upon men's spirits (animal spirits? plastic natures?). 'These do maintain and keep up Mens Spirits; and you know Mens Spirits do strongly resist all manner of Disease. . .'.<sup>4</sup> The Platonists could wax quite as excitingly eloquent about the horrors of faulty mental hygiene as the Calvinists could about the damnation to which most of the human race was doomed.

<sup>1</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Whichcote, *op. cit.*, p. 431.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Moreover, the Platonists' definition of freedom bore considerable resemblance to the Hindu conception of *moksha*, for it denoted freedom from 'Lust and exorbitant Passions . . . more fierce and cruel than Wolves and Tygers'.<sup>1</sup> Religion is recommended by Whichcote as the certain road to spiritual freedom.

'It sets a Man free from eager impetuous Loves; from vain and disappointing Hopes; from lawless and exorbitant Appetites; from frothy and empty Joys; from dismal presaging Fears and anxious cares; from inward Heartburnings; from Self-eating Envy, from swelling Pride, and Ambition; from dull and black Melancholy; from boiling Anger, and raging Fury; from a gnawing, aiking Conscience; from Arbitrary Presumption; from rigid Sowness, and Severity of Spirit: for these make the Man that is not biass'd and principled with Religion, inwardly to boil; to be Hot with the Fervours of Hell. . . .'<sup>2</sup>

Praising the man who is truly religious in the sense that he has moulded his own inner life in accord with God's will, Cudworth says,

' . . . he is above the superstitious dreading of mere speculative opinions, as well as the superstitious reverence of outward ceremonies: he cares not so much for subtlety as for soundness and health of mind.'<sup>3</sup>

The second of these corollaries to the Platonists' central position bears some resemblance to the typology which Roger Williams developed to such great lengths in his struggle for freedom of religious thought in America. Quite in accord with the inwardness which the Platonists are forever preaching and with their scorn of ceremonies and dogmatic opinions is their conviction that to have truth and relevance an idea must be 'proved upon the pulses'. Therefore when men ranted too violently against the Antichrist and identified him with the Pope in Rome,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Cudworth, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

Fowler was reminded that the real Antichrist dwelt in the hearts of men and must first be extirpated thence.

'... we shall not much longer wait for the downfall of the visible antichrist if the spiritual and invisible one, whose seat is erected in our own breasts, were once fallen. This being that which is like, as long as it continueth, to keep the other in his chair, in spite of our prayers and other endeavours to pluck him thence.'<sup>1</sup>

As if relying upon a kind of sympathetic magic, Fowler urged inward purity as a means of toppling the visible Antichrist. Roger Williams, in this same mood, was forever berating his Puritan brethren for being so literal-minded as to consider the Old Testament a kind of theocratic handbook instead of seeing that each Biblical story was a type of some spiritual experience of the Christian—much as Dante explained to Can Grande the four levels of meaning which he saw in the story of Jacob and which he was trying to establish in the *Divine Comedy*. Cudworth so interprets the Virgin Birth that it has an immediate relevance to all his hearers, and in the process he carefully avoids any arguments concerning its objective truth.

'It will not avail us to believe that he was born of a virgin unless the power of the Most High overshadow our hearts, and beget him there likewise.'<sup>2</sup>

On reading passages such as this, one cannot help speculating about whether the setting up of Christianity or of any other religion as the only true one would have been possible if its events had all been translated thus into the inwardness of men's daily lives. Perhaps to live out the drama, translated spiritually, of any of the world's great religions would be the one sure way to avoid exalting any one of them above the others.

When we turn, at this point, from the Platonists to look before and after—toward the Renaissance and toward Romanticism—

<sup>1</sup> Fowler, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

<sup>2</sup> Cudworth, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

there is thrown into sharpened focus the central element which the two have in common and whose presence may help us to understand what it was Coleridge was trying to salvage from seventeenth-century thought. It is the kind of humanism which is given striking expression by John Donne in one of his sermons.

'For, man is not onely a contributory Creature, but a totall Creature; He does not onely make one, but he is all; He is not a piece of the world, but the world it self; and next to the glory of God, the reason why there is a world.'<sup>1</sup>

We have seen the Platonists emphasizing oneness and advising that all knowledge and belief be tested by translation into the living language of man's action. What is this but a further development of the humanism of Erasmus and More and Pico as it was modified and expanded throughout the Renaissance? For the Platonists, as for Donne, man the microcosm becomes the centre of all things—not man 'cribb'd, cabin'd, and confined' to his place between the animals and the angels but man in so far as he embodies the divine, and progressively more of the divine as he purifies his own way of life. This is no idolatrous exaltation of the puny human creature into the lord of creation—a charge so often levelled at the Romantics and the American Transcendentalists and usually with as little cause as at the Platonists. This is rather to fan the god-like spark within man until it bursts into flame and struggles to lose itself in the all-enveloping radiance of the divine. Thus it follows, as Smith says, that 'a good man finds not his religion *without* him, but as a living principle *within* him; and all his faculties are still endeavouring to unite themselves more and more in the nearest intimacy with it as their proper perfection'.<sup>2</sup> Although traces of God are to be found throughout the whole of His creation and often in the books men have been inspired to write, the Platonists are forever warning their readers not to linger among these secondary sources but to push on to the primary one.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Mahood, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 395.



'To seek our Divinity merely in books and writings is to seek the living among the dead; we do but in vain to seek God many times in these, where His truth too often is not so much enshrined as entombed; No, *intra te quaere Deum*, seek for God within thine own soul: He is best discerned, as Plotinus phraseth it, by an intellectual touch of Him. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Later, in America, Emerson with much the same intent warned American scholars against the worship of books, which he said were only to be used when the scholar was for some reason unable to read the face of God directly.

Smith is particularly fond of using the figure of the sun and its rays to picture forth the presence of God in the world. All the beauty and loveliness we see in the world, he says in accents reminiscent of Plato himself, are only emanations of the one inexhaustible light which dwells above<sup>2</sup>; but he distinguishes between the various emanations. 'God is more clearly and lively pictured upon the souls of men than upon any part of the sensible world.'<sup>3</sup> If one needed to document Wordsworth's and Coleridge's relinquishment of Pantheism for Platonism, one could perhaps find some clue here.

If the Platonists had in mind the Calvinist conception of God when they preached His dwelling within the soul of man, they had the Calvinists even more obviously in mind when they preached that Heaven and Hell, far from being merely places to which God has assigned men, are projections of the state of men's souls. The most famous of these statements is Whichcote's aphorism, 'Heaven is *first* a Temper, and *then* a Place'.<sup>4</sup> Smith says, 'Religion delivers us from Hell by instating us in a possession of true life and bliss. . . . Heaven cannot be so truly defined by any thing without us, as by something that is within us.'<sup>5</sup> Cudworth tries to persuade the Commons of the immediacy of Heaven and Hell and so awaken them from their complacency. In fact, he seems to be removing at once the glamour and awesomeness respectively

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 446.

of Heaven and Hell (as seen from far away) by transporting them into the centre of men's lives—all of which is perhaps the essence of humanism and of the deism in which it eventuated.

'Hell is nothing but the orb of sin and wickedness or else that hemisphere of darknesse in which all evil moves: and Heaven, is the opposite hemisphere of light or else, if you please, the bright orb of truth, holiness, and goodness: and we do actually in this life instate ourselves in the possession of one or other of them.'<sup>1</sup>

Thus, as Whichcote had also said, man may estimate his future state by his present, and there are no great surprises awaiting him at the judgment, which will merely make eternal the quality of life which he has been building for himself throughout his days on earth. Emerson, too, conceived of immortality in these terms. There is perhaps less of false comfort than of stern challenge in Smith's words: 'A man *is* such as the end he aims at. . . . The foundation of heaven and hell is raised in men's own souls.'<sup>2</sup> Here again is that emphasis upon man and upon the importance of his own inner life which links humanists and Platonists with deists and with an outstanding Romantic, who could say, ' . . . in our life alone does nature live', when he had been lured into thinking that inner excitement depended upon some outer force called Nature—a temptation into which men are always slipping back from the delicate equilibrium required for a man to live as if man were 'not a piece of the world, but the world itself; and next to the glory of God, the reason why there is a world.'<sup>3</sup>

One looks backward to the idealism of Plato and forward to that of the American Transcendentalists when one observes the Cambridge Platonists concentrating upon the good, the true, and the beautiful and treating all else as unreal deviations from the normative Real. It is as if the soul which had known God 'by an intellectual touch of Him', as Plotinus says, thereby acquired an unerring taste for the truth and could ferret it out in the most

<sup>1</sup> Cudworth, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Pausanias, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Donne, quoted by Mahood, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

unlikely places. This tact is accompanied by a kind of confidence which is in marked contrast to the Calvinists' cringing before the unpredictable decrees of an arbitrary God. 'True religion,' says Smith,

'never finds itself out of the infinite sphere of the Divinity; and wherever it finds beauty, harmony, goodness, love, ingenuity, wisdom, holiness, justice, and the like, it is ready to say, here and there is God: wheresoever any such perfections shine out, a holy mind climbs up by the sunbeams, and raises itself up to God.'<sup>1</sup>

Such sentiments augur well for an acceptance of life rather than a rejection of it and for a recognition that the sunbeams which lead upward to God are not confined to any specific area of the earth's surface.

V

This hospitality to all the truth reflected by human candles leads on to the Platonists' toleration of other religious thinkers and to their nascent deism. Although one cannot expect any of the seventeenth-century thinkers to be as completely tolerant as we, from our vantage-point, think we would have been, nevertheless the breadth of their statements on the subject of toleration is remarkable and can furnish us with the ground plans of structures which we like to think we ourselves would be capable of constructing. Burnet advises, with Scripture as his authority, that men should try all things to see whether they are true or false, and if false, to discover whether the falsity is

'prejudicial to Religion or no. But for every new theory that is propos'd, to be alarm'd, as if all Religion was falling about our Ears, is to make the World suspect that we are very ill assur'd of the foundation it stands upon. Besides do not all Men complain, even These as well as others, of the great ignorance of Mankind? how little we know, and how much is still unknown? and can we ever know more, unless something new be Discover'd?'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tulloch, *op. cit.*, II, 185.

<sup>2</sup> Burnet, *op. cit.*, p. a2 recto.

that only external violence supported false religions, and if this were withdrawn and free competition established, truth, that is, Christianity, by its very reasonableness would prevail.

'Wherefore if it could be agreed upon to take away this external support, false religion and vain superstition would sink, those bladders and bulrushes being taken from under them, and that onely would be found to swimme whose innate truth was able to bear it up of itself. And such certainly is the naked Simplicity of the Christian religion. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

One wonders whether the Platonists sensed unconsciously that perhaps the naked simplicity of each religion would be able to bear it up when the 'bladders and bulrushes' of dogmatically held non-essentials had been abandoned—or whether the mood of their time was to move in weariness toward the nearest available simplicity.

When Coleridge argues in support of Christianity, he follows much the same line of reasoning; and the metaphysics behind both More and Coleridge implies that the truth must necessarily be that which satisfies man's needs as a creature made in the image of God. When the authorities of Cambridge University would have tried to interfere, as such authorities often do, with this method of propagating truth, on the theory that too great dangers were involved, Whichcote felt it necessary to remind his superiors that truth is not only very old but in fact indestructible and that a university has no other function than to try to seek it out.

'*Truth is truth*, whosoever hath spoken it, or howsoever it hath been abused: but if this libertie may not be allowed to the university, wherfore do wee study? We have nothing to do, but to get good memories, and to learn by heart.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Henry More, *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (London, 1660), p. xxviii.

<sup>2</sup> Mullinger, *op. cit.*, p. 593.

Coleridge, too, spoke of truth as a 'divine ventriloquist' and said that he cared not from whose mouth the words came, so long as they were veracious.

But the problem confronting every man who preaches toleration is that of distinguishing between truth and error. How shall he know which is which, and how shall he make sure that he follows in the way of truth? Powicke pays tribute to the success with which the Platonists attacked this problem when he says,

'... what they really did was to respect the convictions of others; to teach that within the husk of every error there was a kernel of truth worth searching for; to plead for "moderation and persuasion toward all opponents"'.<sup>1</sup>

Coleridge more than a century later seems only to have rephrased what the Platonists had said about there being no error without its attendant truth although he sometimes conceived of the two as more organically involved than did his predecessors. Cudworth in *A Discourse Concerning the True Notion of the Lord's Supper* not only elaborates a theory concerning the mingling of truth and falsehood but illustrates it by analyzing 'the Papists' error that the Lord's supper is a sacrifice'. The reason we find falsehood and truth mingled in the world today, he argues, is that falsehood, being without substance or reality, must link itself with truth if it is to impose itself upon us.

'Pure falsehood is pure nonentity, and could not subsist alone by itself; wherefore it always twines up together about some truth. ... There is ever some soul of truth which doth secretly spirit and enliven the dead and unwieldy lump of all errors, without which it could not move or stir.'<sup>2</sup>

The specific point he is trying to make about the Lord's Supper is that it is 'not a sacrifice but a feast upon a sacrifice'. The task imposed upon man is that of making fine distinctions like this one

<sup>1</sup> Powicke, *op.cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> (London, 1642), p. 1.

and so separating out the truth which has been misused to cover error.

Not only are truth and falsehood often wrapped in the same package, but the man who would separate them must be spiritually stalwart. In defending *The Principles and Practices of Certain Moderate Divines of the Church of England*. . ., Edward Fowler is true to the Platonist tenet that the life a man leads will have a direct bearing upon his discovery of truth. He makes use of the story of God's appearing to Elijah not in the whirlwind but in the 'still, small voice' and says,

' . . . so divine truth is far more unlikely to be found among men of violent and boisterous passions, than among those that are soberly and sedately considerative.'<sup>1</sup>

What is wrong about passion (and this gives still another clue to the Platonist ethics) is that it clouds the understanding with a thick mist and makes it 'altogether unapt to discern a difference betwixt truth and the error that is nearest to it; and to distinguish it from one of the extremes which it lieth between'.<sup>2</sup> This latter statement lends, also, a note of Aristotelianism to Fowler's conception of truth. Man, then, is to discipline himself and so to seek freely for the truth.

In this process, however, man is to remain humble on account of his nescience and is not to put too high an evaluation on his opinions, recognizing that they may be wrong or that he may assert them with too bold and dogmatic a spirit. For these reasons the Platonists advise the living of a life of charity and so correcting slowly one's own errors and leaving to God the maintenance of His truth in the world.

Thomas Burnet, like the others, sees the inevitability and even the necessity of differing opinions if Christianity is not to succumb to a deadly stasis, and in this he resembles Milton.

'Lastly, in things purely Speculative, . . . and no ingredients of our faith, it is free to differ from one another in our Opinions

<sup>1</sup> (London, 1670), p. xi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

and Sentiments; and so I remember *S. Austin* hath observ'd upon this very subject of *Paradise*; Wherefore as we desire to give no offence our selves, so neither shall we take any at the difference of Judgment in others; provided this liberty be mutual, and that we all agree to study *Peace, Truth, and a good Life*.<sup>1</sup>

Reminiscent of the spirit of Thomas Browne in *Religio Medici* is Burnet's resolution to assert 'principal conclusions' and leave the 'several particulars . . . to examination.'<sup>2</sup>

Whichcote's writings are like a well from whose impressive depths every bucketful draws up reinforcement for the proposition that Christians must tolerate each other's opinions in matters indifferent—chiefly because this is the only insurance against their all failing to go on seeking the truth. It is the perpetual motion of the human psyche which must be provided for, or at least its continual growth until it arrives at genuine spiritual maturity. Says Whichcote in an aphorism,

'If there were no contradiction in the several apprehensions of men, we might never be awakened to search into things, and so if we were once in a mistake we should never come out of it.'<sup>3</sup>

Again Whichcote says,

'Men have an itch rather to *make* Religion, than to *use* it: but we are to use our Religion; not to make it.

He that never *changed* any of his opinions, never *corrected* any of his Mistakes: and He, who was never *wise* enough, to find out any mistakes in Himself: will not be *charitable* enough, to excuse what he reckons mistakes in others.'<sup>4</sup>

Here lies the authentic psychological explanation of tolerance, one which underlies both the Golden Rule and the petition 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass

<sup>1</sup> Burnet, *op. cit.*, p. 23 *recto*.

<sup>2</sup> Tulloch, *op. cit.*, II, 101.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>4</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

against us.' Whichcote feels that 'religion is in an unnatural use if it doth disunite'.<sup>1</sup> Ill will, anger, and displeasure must be left behind by the truth seeker. 'For envy, ill-will, strife, and contention are as prejudicial as any other inordinate affection whatsoever. Sublime knowledge cannot dwell in an unquiet spirit.'<sup>2</sup> Men should be able, he feels, to differ with each other and still maintain an unbroken affection.<sup>3</sup> If this does not happen, religion will have made them worse, not better. Writing to Tuckney, Whichcote says, striking again the note of nescience:

'Our fallibility and the shortness of our knowledge should make us peaceable and gentle: because I may be mistaken, I must not be dogmatical and confident, peremptory and imperious. I will not break the certain laws of charity for a doubtful doctrine, or an uncertain truth.'<sup>4</sup>

The Platonists felt that given the transcendence of God, 'it is better to confess ignorance than rashly to claim that we comprehend Him.' The real test of truth is not theory or belief but action, and Whichcote at once anticipates and goes beyond modern empiricism because he is more than faintly aware of its ultimate implications.

'If a man manifests the Christian temper and life, why reject him? God will receive him, why not you? The gate is too wide, you say; it would admit some who have no Christian creed and many whose Christian creed is defective; and even not a few who do not preach Christ. Whichcote's answer to the last point, considering his environment, is surely a brave one. Men (he said) may preach Christ "though they do not name Christ in every sentence, or period, of words. If men contend for the effects of real goodness and deny wickedness, *they* do truly and properly preach Christ... for this is the effect of Christ and *this* is Christ's business. God having raised up His Son, sent Him to bless us. How? By turning

<sup>1</sup> Whichcote, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

<sup>2</sup> Mullinger, *op. cit.*, p. 595.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Pawson, *op. cit.*, p. 25.



away every man from his sins. Wherefore, whosoever doth deal with men to leave off sin, preaches Christ and carries on Christ's work.'<sup>1</sup>

In such a passage as this we feel that we stand in the midst of the controversies swirling about the Platonists, where in the absence of a touchstone for determining abstract truth, since only God truly knows this, an individual must be revealed by his works. Whichcote makes clear in a letter to Tuckney how responsibility is shared between man and God.

*'For the maintenance of truth is rather God's charge, and the continuance of charity ours.'*<sup>2</sup>

The man who is relieved by God from the responsibility of maintaining truth in the world has, as Montaigne says, 'a marvellous preferment to tranquility', for without any intellectual face to save, he can concentrate on cultivating his sensitivity to the truth, broadening his perception of it, and continuing to exercise charity toward his fellows. Says Whichcote,

*'If I know myself at all, I know that in discovering of truth I do not dally nor have any wordly design, but with all indifferency of mind do receive from God what I have assurance is from him.'*<sup>3</sup>

This 'indifferency of mind' was called by the Pyrrhonists *iso-sothenia* and *epoché*. Tulloch pays tribute to this quality in Cudworth when in response to the stock objection that the Platonist does not lead one to certainty, he replies,

*'And if we do not come in his pages nearer to that certainty which some minds are destined never to reach in this world of endless interrogation, we may be helped to trust where we cannot know, to tolerate those who differ from us, and to welcome light and truth from whatever quarter it may come.'*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Powicke, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Tulloch, *op. cit.*, II, 79.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* II, 302.

Thus Tulloch phrases succinctly the Platonists' prescription for toleration. A more colourful and forceful statement is to be found in Jeremy Taylor's obviously annoyed outburst in *A Discourse of the Liberty of Prophesying*:

For my own particular I cannot but expect, that God in his Justice should enlarge the bounds of the Turkish Empire, or some other way punish Christians by reason of their pertinacious disputing about things unnecessary, undeterminable, and unprofitable, and for their hating and persecuting their brethren which should be as dear to them as their own lives, for not consenting to one another's follies, and senseless vanities: How many volumes have been writ about Angels, about immaculate conception, about originall sin, when that all that is solid reason or clear Revelation, in all these three Articles, may be reasonably enough comprized in fourty lines. And in these trifles and impertinencies men are curiously busie while they neglect those glorious precepts of Christianity and holy life, which are the glories of our Religion, and would enable us to a happy eternity.<sup>1</sup>

Taylor here follows his Master in unmitigated scorn for the tithers of mint, anise, and cummin who neglect 'the weightier matters of the law.'

## VI

The inevitable next step after the recommendation of tolerance in 'things indifferent' is in the direction of deism since what Christians have in common necessarily broadens out into what all men have in common. A careless reader of Culverwel's *Light of Nature* might easily convict him of anti-Semitism, whereas he is using the Jews as whipping boys in order to lambaste the pernicious dogmatism and intolerance of those Puritans who drew most of their religious sustenance from the Old Testament rather than from the New, as well as those non-Puritans who shared their exclusiveness. His attack is powerful in its irony.

<sup>1</sup> (London, 1647), p. 43.

'... the Jews . . . do imagine, and suppose that the light of Nature shines onely upon themselves originally and principally, and upon the Gentiles only by way of participation and dependence upon them; they all must light their Candles at the Jewish Lamp. Thus they strive, as much as they can do, to engross and monopolize this Natural Light to themselves; onely it may be sometimes, out of their great liberality, they will distribute some broken Beams of it to the Gentiles. . . . as if they only enjoyed a Goshen of Natural Light, and all the rest of the world were benighted in most palpable and unavoidable Darkness: as if the Sun shin'd onely upon Canaan: as if Canaan only flow'd with this Milk and Honey: as if no drops of Heaven could fall upon a Wildernesse, unlesse an Israelite be there: as if they had the whole impression of Nature's Law: as if God had not dealt thus with every Nation: as if the Heathen also had not the knowledge of this Law. 'Tis true, they had the first Beauty of the rising Sun, the first peepings out of the Day, the first dawnings of Natural Light; for there were no other, that it could then shine upon; but do they mean to check the Sun in its motion, to stop this Giant in his race, to hinder him from scattering rayes of Light in the world? Do they think, that Nature's Fountain is enclos'd, that her Well is seal'd up, that a Jew must onely drink of it, and a Gentile must die for Thirst?'<sup>1</sup>

The deistic leading of Culverwel's thought is obvious when he concludes,

' . . . but yet, for all this, they have no greater a portion of the Light of Nature, then all men have. Thus Christians also . . . in respect of their natural condition, have no more then others.'<sup>2</sup>

Culverwel admits that the Heathen sometimes 'went a gleanings in the Jewish fields' and cites Pythagoras and Plato as notable gleaners. But they did not need to borrow their first principles, which emanated from the light of nature.

<sup>1</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

'Give then unto the Jews the things of the Jewes, and to the Gentile the things that are the Gentiles; and that which God hath made common, call not thou peculiar.'<sup>1</sup>

We are reminded of the 'common notions' of Herbert of Cherbury which the Platonists are convinced stem from a proper use of reason and are therefore available to all men—Christian and heathen alike. Culverwel meets the objections of all those (Jews, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, *et al.*) who reject reason and substitute for it authority and tradition.

'But yet the Jews will by no means yield that there is light enough in the dictates of Reason, to display Common Notions; for they look upon it as a various and unsatisfactory light, mix'd with much Shadow and Darkness, labouring with perpetual inconstancy and uncertainty. What, are first Principles become so mutable and treacherous? Are Demonstrations such fortuitous and contingent things? Had I met with this in a fluctuating Academick, in a rowling Sceptick, in a Sextus Empiricus, in some famous Professour of Doubts, I should then have look'd upon it, as a tolerable expression of their trembling and shivering opinion. But how come I to find it among those Divers into the depths of Knowledge, who grant a certainty, and yet will not grant it to Reason? I would they would tell us then, where we might hope to find it. Surely not in an Oriental Tradition, in a Rabbinical Dream, in a dusty Manuscript, in a remnant of Antiquity, in a Bundle of Testimonies; and yet this is all you are like to get of them. . . . O rare and admirable foundation of Plerophory! O incomparable method, and contrivance to find out certainty, to rase out first Principles, to pluck down Demonstrations, to demolish the whole structure and fabrick of Reason, and to build upon the word of two or three Hebrew Doctors that tell you of a voice, and that as confidently as if they had heard it, and spread it unto others, though they do it, like unfaithful Echoes, with false and imperfect rebound.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

With mockery and sarcasm Culverwel proceeds to ridicule the Jews (read also Roman Catholics and Anglicans) for not providing the Gentiles a trustworthy guide, as they promised to do.

'How sad were the condition of the Gentiles if they were to live upon the Jews courtesie and benevolence, that would strip them of Nature, plunder them of their Essences, rob them of their first Principles, and Common Notions?'<sup>1</sup>

The guide, however, Culverwel insists, has already been provided by the God who implanted the common notions in men's hearts to be discovered by reason.

As for that stumbling-block in the way of countless generations of Christians, 'Shall the heathen be saved?' Edward Fowler maintains a truly sceptical *epoché* and makes the life and not the belief of the heathen the deciding factor.

'To say the truth, many of them, for all their not having heard of Christ, and their being strangers to the Bible, have out-done most Christians, to our great shame be it spoken. But, I say, that God is not nor hath not been wanting to them neither, as to the enabling them to do so much, as he expects from them; and so making them capable of some lower degrees of happiness. . . . But, Philalethes, we need not trouble our selves about them; we shall, no question, at the great day (if we can but have patience to wait till then) clearly understand the infinite justice of God Almighty's proceedings with them; . . . For my part, I will not say that they are any of them saved; but I would not for a world, neither, pronounce them all damned. . . . So that, I say, if any of the Heathens be saved (which if they are not, it will be their own faults) it may be time enough to understand their obligation to Christ for it, when they are come into the other world.'<sup>2</sup>

The frankness and conversational quality of this argument and the implication that great patience is required to await the arbitra-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Fowler, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

ment of 'the great day' touch us as a more formal argument would not.

If we set alongside each other another passage from Culverwel's *Light of Nature* and one from John Smith's *Select Discourses*, we can block in the main outlines of the Platonists' deism, including their conviction that there is a transcendent truth which can command the 'consent of nations' but that it may, without the spectacles of reason, issue in a congeries of incompatible and dogmatically held half-truths. The two passages constitute therefore a deistically oriented study in the psychology of dogmatism. Culverwel describes the 'true light of nature' thus:

'Surely that must needs be a clear convincing light, that can command respect and adoration from all beholders; it must be an orient pearl indeed, if none will trample upon it. It must be a conquering and triumphant truth that can stop the mouths of gainsayers, and pass the world without contradiction. Surely that is pure gold that has been examined by so many several touch-stones and has had approbation from them all. Certainly it is some transcendent beauty, that so many nations are enamoured withal. It is some powerful music that sets the whole world a dancing. It is some pure and delicious relish, that can content and satisfy every palate. It is some accurate piece, that passes so many critics without any animadversion, without any "various readings". It is an elegant picture, that neither the eye of an artist, nor yet a popular eye, can find fault withal. Think but upon the several tempers, and dispositions of men—how curious are some! how censorious are others! how envious and malicious are some! how various and mutable are others! how do some love to be singular, others to be contentious! how doubtful and wavering is one, how jealous and suspicious is another! and then tell me whether it must not be some authentical and unquestionable truth, that can at all times have a certificate and *commendamus* from them all.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Campagnac, *op. cit.*, pp. 276-7.

The reason why so many thinkers stop short of this ideal truth is explained by Smith as he begins with the deist assumption of one truth acceptable to all men when approached through reason and the same truth distorted into warring elements by those who accidentally seize upon one or another of its attributes and, like the blind men touching one part of the elephant, insist they can thereby define the whole. There are echoes here of the Jain doctrine of *syadvada*.

'There are some common notions and a natural instinct of devotion seated in the minds of men, which are ever and anon roving after religion; and as they casually and fortuitously start up any models and ideas of it, they are presently prone to believe themselves to have found out this only pearl of price: the religion of most men being indeed nothing else but such a strain and scheme of thoughts and actions, as their natural propensions, swayed by nothing else but an inbred belief of a Deity, accidentally run into; nothing else but an image and resemblance of their own fancies which are ever busy in painting out themselves; which is the reason why there are as many shapes and features of religion painted forth in the minds of men, as there are various shapes of faces and fancies.'<sup>1</sup>

Here is the Platonists' version of the problem of the one and the many, shot through with the deism into which their thinking naturally led. The emotional tone, with its underlying optimism and evidence of having 'bid John Calvin good-night', is best represented by George Rust when he says,

'God is an Ocean of love and goodness, that delights to overflow his banks, and break in upon his creatures and make them happy.'<sup>2</sup>

That statements such as this one represented Arminianism is perhaps negligible in view of the more important fact that they led on toward a deism which in the following century was to be transformed by a growing simplification of thought into some-

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thing far less rich than it had been among the Cambridge Platonists.

Even a cursory reading of these men who could embody so many elements of creative scepticism and yet could adumbrate the coming intellectual wasteland reveals something of this strange intermingling of intellectual positions which is the clue to their unique contribution to the history of thought. George Rust, for example, proclaims himself a stalwart creative sceptic in the sense in which we have been using that term by endorsing the New Testament admonition 'to search the scriptures; to prove all things; and to examine and try the spirit'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as we have seen,<sup>2</sup> Rust would pardon more readily the man who falls into error after searching and examining than him who assents 'blindly and fortuitously . . . , though to truth itself'. This position coincides almost exactly with Milton's condemnation of the man who is 'a heretic in the truth' because he has relied on someone else's judgment to decide what is true for him in the matter of religion. Again, Rust's biting condemnation of the dogmatism of religious sectaries would seem to strike the true sceptic note. Those who rely for their spiritual guidance upon Mahomet, the Pope, Luther, Calvin, Arminius, or Socinus he condemns for their blindness, concluding that among many of his contemporaries 'Truth is confident ignorance, assisted with heady and turbulent zeal and backt with merciless persecution of all gainsayers.'<sup>3</sup>

Yet even among such statements there are backhanded slaps at 'this sceptical age', and Rust concludes that the foundations of both scepticism and 'rantism' are laid when a man has 'no basis on which he can raise any true conclusion'<sup>4</sup> and therefore must conclude that he knows nothing. Rust, of course, is using the term 'scepticism' with the connotations which it was to have in the eighteenth century, and this fact is itself a clue to the changing climate of opinion. The basis for 'any true conclusion' must even now be something clear and precise and manageable, not something which a man glimpses only fitfully. Had Rust been more

<sup>1</sup> *Discourse*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Remains*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *supra*, p. 133-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

## THE CAMBRIDGE PLATONISTS: IN TRANSITION

akin spiritually to the sceptics of the earlier seventeenth century, he might have been able to move confidently from an undisturbed and strenuous nescience through to a conviction that the lesson of dogmatisms, from Papist through Socinian, is that truth is larger and more complex than any man's conception of it. In his *Discourse of Truth*, Rust implies rather that if there were only some kind of enforceable law against mutability (that goad which continued to prick the Renaissance), everyone could settle down to a generally comprehensible conception of truth, a conception which one suspects, however, is to be dictated by some authority more circumscribed than God Himself. This rather weary and implicitly cynical conclusion is a far cry from the vigorous and confident struggles of the truly creative sceptics.

Instead of imaginatively putting himself in the shoes of his opponent, Rust, in his metaphysical fury with John Calvin, loses sight of the possibility that sometimes a man may assert his belief in what he does not yet thoroughly understand and still not be merely deceiving himself. He may rather, like many of the earlier creative sceptics, be reaching out toward a notion just beyond his grasp and so pulling himself up toward what he cannot yet see clearly but on whose existence he has wagered his life. Rust momentarily loses sight of his sceptic origins when he boasts that he distrusts above all else the man who 'miserably imposes upon himself with a company of words prettily put together, which yet have no conception answering to them in the mind'.<sup>1</sup> But how can he be sure that words which have no meaning for

'And if we will not allow this, all the knowledge in the world will be no better than the clattering and insignificant sound of words, an impertinent noise and mere brutal language. For anything will then signify anything, and any medium whatever (though seemingly never so suitable) will be fitted to prove any conclusion, if . . . the mutual respects of things which are the foundations of all Reason and Science, be mutable and alterable by arbitrary will and pleasure.'<sup>1</sup>

What Rust is convinced of is that if God is an arbitrary and unpredictable God, then the mutual relations of things are not eternal and unchangeable. It seems to me that Rust, in arguing that whatever arbitrary decisions God may have made before the beginning of time or whatever decisions he may make now (if one can speak of time in relation to God), the order of the world as man knows it can not have been affected, is shooting down a straw deity. Even the staunchest Calvinist does not usually conceive of a God who operates arbitrarily within the framework of man's known world of time. And if he did, this would be merely a wise recognition of man's nescience and an acknowledgement that his thoughts and God's are often far apart. Rust, however (and here he is again striking out against the sceptical tendencies of his age), bases his trust in the senses themselves upon the unchanging nature of God, to which is linked man's 'certainty of knowledge or assurance of happiness'.<sup>2</sup> But the sceptic would stop to ask in what sense man can be sure of the unchanging nature of God or why he should wish to be. And what does the trustworthiness of sense experience have to do with the 'assurance of happiness'? Rust's confidence in and exaltation of sense experience is remarkably like Bacon's and has no doubt similar implications of premature stasis and hence of spiritual myopia. Both men on this side of their natures were fathering the oversimplification of Augustan rationalism.

Again, in the demand that words 'must have precise conceptions answering to them in the mind' and that the order of the

<sup>1</sup> *Remains*, *op. cit.*, pref., p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

world must be seizable by man's reason Rust gives evidence of his movement toward Augustan simplicity and away from the rich scepticism of the earlier part of the century. In *A Discourse of the Use of Reason in Matters of Religion* he concludes, 'That God should therefore reveal any thing contrary to right reason is alike impious as to suppose him to be a liar, and to contradict the internal conceptions of his own wisdom'.<sup>1</sup> Whether this represents truth or nonsense depends upon how narrowly one conceives of right reason and how closely one equates it with God's wisdom.

In *An Elegant and Learned discourse of the Light of Nature* Nathaniel Culverwel in the course of his argument based on the text that 'The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord' attacks the sceptics—Pyrrho, the Academics, Sextus Empiricus, as well as Heraclitus, Protagoras, Plato, and Descartes by the way. Except for lumping the Academics with the others, as if they stood for precisely the same things, Culverwel gives a very fair picture of sceptic principles. What he objects to is that reason and logic should be condemned by them as 'rolling and fluctuating', as 'treacherous and unconstant',<sup>2</sup> whereas it can be asked of scepticism itself—'what Philosophy more wavering and voluble? was there ever a more reeling and staggering company? was there ever a more tumbling and tossing generation?'<sup>3</sup> The chief concern of both sides is therefore with the problem of mutability and whether man has any resources for solving it. Culverwel goes at once to the heart of the question and gives his opponents the benefit of the doubt, commending them for what he thinks they may mean, for the admirable humility of their nescience.

'... if these Academicks by their ἀταλαςία meant no more then this, thatt he whole Intelligibility of any entity, could not be exhausted by them, that they could not perfectly and powerfully pierce into any object as to discover all that was knowable in it, their opinion then was not onely tolerable, but very commendable,

<sup>1</sup> p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

and undeniable; for only God himself, doth thus *ηαταλαμβάνω*. There is not enough in any created lamp to give such a bright displaying of an object. Nor is there vigour enough in any created eye, so to pierce into the pith and marrow of being, into the depth and secrecy of being.<sup>1</sup>

However, Culverwel in line with the Platonists' tendency not to stress nescience objects to the sceptics' going beyond this insight into an important truth and pushing their nescience to what he feels is an absurd, and indeed impious, extreme. To do so, he says in Baconian tones, is to call in question the plan by which the Creator set up man's intellectual faculties.

'But if their minde was this (as 'tis generally thought to be) that there was nothing in being so visible as that their understanding could pierce it with certainty and satisfaction, such an Error as this was very derogatory to the plenitude and exuberancy of being that streams out in a clear cognoscibility, and 'twas very injurious to their own rational capacities, which were not made so strait and narrow-mouth'd as not to receive those notions that continually drop from being; But they were contriv'd and proportion'd for the well-being and entertaining of truths, that love to open and thread themselves into the soul without spilling.'<sup>2</sup>

Culverwel agrees with the sceptics that man cannot by means of his own unaided intellect 'pierce into the pith and marrow of being', but to deduce from this that man can never be sure of any truth, no matter how simple, is, he feels, to denigrate 'the plenitude and exuberancy of being' and to belittle the mind of man, which was designed to receive naturally and gratefully 'those notions that continually drop from being'. Seldom has the coming of truths into the mind of man been more poetically and luminously described. One can understand more easily now the impossibility of the Platonists' ever conceiving that man and God are separated by an unbridgeable gulf. Rather, the eternal flows

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

abundantly into the temporal, which has been carefully fashioned to receive it. How far is this attitude from the *angst* of Pascal.

After several rhetorical questions addressed to Pyrrho concerning appearance and reality, Culverwel names God as 'that eternal and immutable being, that fixt, and unshaken Entity . . . [which] must needs be the fountaine of certainty, as of all other perfections.'<sup>1</sup> Here again the Platonist has presented no detailed evidence that man, with the best will in the world, can grasp the nature and plot the fixedness of God's entity. In fact, he seems to have abandoned such a high goal. His argument—and it is a reasonable and understandable one, if somewhat lacking in the sceptic insight we have been led to expect, even from the Cambridge Platonists—is that if man be made in God's image, man must share the certainty of God along with His other attributes.

'God is the only durable object of the soul. Now that the soul may have a satisfactory enjoyment of its God, and that it may be accurately made according to his image, God stamps and prints as resemblances of his other perfections, so this also of certainty upon it; How else should it know the minde of its God? How should it know to please him, to believe him, to obey him? with what confidence could it approach unto him, if it had only weak and wavering conjectures? Nay God lets the soul have some certain acquaintance with other beings for his own sake, and in order to his own glory.'<sup>2</sup>

This modified scepticism, which echoes the gradations of certainty elaborated by the Academic Sceptics, is full of the common sense which we recognize as the hallmark of the approaching eighteenth century. As beings proceed from sense to spirit they partake of 'purer and nobler Certainty', but this fact does nothing, according to Culverwel, to detract from the relative certainty attributable to the senses themselves. Here 'so much certainty as is requisite for such a rational nature as man is may well have its risings and springs out of sense, though it have more refinings and

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-51.

purifyings from the understanding'.<sup>1</sup> What distinguishes this kind of thinking from that which is closer to the sceptic pattern is that it provides for smooth transitions from one opposite to another with never a hint of sharp abysses or profound conflict. Culverwel perhaps provides a diagnosis of his own brand of scepticism when he goes directly to the fundamental human dualism, that of body and spirit, for an analogy to support his argument that man is capable of a graduated kind of certainty, albeit a kind which stops short of the absolute certainty of God.

'... as his being results out of the mysterious union of matter, to immateriality; so likewise his knowledge and the certainty of his knowledge (I speak of naturall knowledge) first peeps out in sense, and shines more brightly in the understanding.<sup>2</sup> ... sense 'tis but the gate of certainty (I speak all this while but of humane certainty) the understanding 'tis the throne of it.'<sup>3</sup>

There is the implication here that somehow the understanding stops short of what Coleridge or the Elizabethans would have called the reason and that man is willing to abide there with it. He recognizes and bows to the impossibility of ever knowing as God knows and is satisfied to confine himself to the exercise of his understanding, where the certainty he can have will be the human certainty which concerns itself with natural knowledge. The fault Culverwel understandably finds with the sceptics (and this too helps to define the Cambridge brand of scepticism) is that they are not thankful 'for their own spirits, which can apprehend sense experience, for these Candles of the Lord, for this *Lumen certum*, set up, not to mock and delude them, but to deal truly and faithfully with them'.<sup>4</sup>

This apparently innocent analysis of sceptic nescience by an outstanding Cambridge Platonist is more than a straw to show which way the wind was blowing as the eighteenth century approached. It is a transparent revelation of the way in which an

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.



offshoot of the genuine sceptic pattern can coexist with the seeds of its own destruction. Conditions were ripe to produce soon and throughout the following century a much starker and less paradoxical and luxuriant yield than any the Cambridge Platonists had known or had anticipated.

## JONATHAN EDWARDS AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SIMPLICITY



IN Jonathan Edwards we have a man of the sceptic stripe who began with the last phase of the pattern, doing in order to know, and, as it were, worked forward. Our concern with him here is to point out against the background of his relationship to creative scepticism the way in which his thought distinguishes itself from that of the typically eighteenth-century rationalism in whose milieu he was set down. This should throw light in two directions: it should illuminate further those aspects of scepticism which Edwards particularly exemplifies (paradox and doing in order to know) and at the same time throw into sharp relief the traits which distinguish the complexity of scepticism from the relative simplicity of neo-classical rationalism—the differences between what we have called the oblique and the direct approaches to the problem of knowing.

Edwards derived from a Puritan tradition, which was beginning to die out in early eighteenth-century New England and which he almost single-handedly revived for what seemed its last spectacular stand, in spite of thoughtless enthusiasts on the one hand and calculating Arminians on the other. It was a tradition which had put crucial emphasis upon the individual believer's experience of God's grace (although monitored and evaluated by his fellow-believers) and which was being forced slowly to retreat from experience-based religion, via the half-way covenant, to a creed which could be defended by reason and which would therefore be more easily available to more men. Edwards' protracted experiences of both God and nature within a Puritan setting, some exalted and some agonizing, but all carefully scrutinized and analyzed for signs of their meaning, must have prepared the way

for his anomalous discovery of John Locke at the age of fourteen.

One might early have predicted what was going to happen, the all-inclusiveness as well as the paradox of his final position, from the fact that Edwards rejected neither the book of God's word nor the book of His works (as that was mediated to him by philosophers like Locke and Newton and by the later moralists Hutcheson and Mandeville), but enthusiastically embraced both since each was an integral part of his experience. Consequently his approach to scripture throughout his life was not by way of the systematic exegesis of texts (a practice of his forebears) nor by way of a clear and simple argument to which finally a motto-like text was attached. Rather, whenever experience taught him some unexpected truth, he reached back into a mind stored with heretofore puzzling passages of scripture and sought confirmation and further enlightenment. The truth of experience and the truth of scripture did on occasion amazingly come together, and a kind of glory shone around the illuminated Edwards. Here the process of understanding was not fundamentally a simple one in which he strove directly to apprehend the truth and ultimately succeeded. Rather was it a wrestling with experience, like Jacob's encounter with the angel, until a blessing was forthcoming out of the critical struggle with forces indefinable and unmanageable. Jacob called the site of his struggle Penial, the face of God, in tribute to the overwhelming truth which emerged from it.

By the time Edwards had come to writing his 'Dissertation Concerning the end for which God Created the World', near the close of his life, he had become adept at this technique for penetrating to the depths of scripture. He was trying to elucidate the external and internal glory of God as communicated to his creature, who shares with Him the faculties of understanding and will.

'God communicates himself to the understanding of the creature, in giving him the knowledge of his glory; and to the will of the

creature, in giving him holiness, consisting primarily in the love of God; and in giving the creature happiness, chiefly consisting in joy in God. These are the sum of that emanation of divine fulness, called in Scripture *the glory of God*. The first part of this glory is called *truth*, the latter *grace*. John i:14, "We beheld his *glory*, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of *grace* and *truth*".<sup>1</sup>

Here the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration were undergoing essentially the same experience of the presence of God as Jacob knew at Peniel.

A simpler and less perceptive mind than Edwards, pondering this text, would, in the first place, never have of its own volition attempted to penetrate to the meaning of such a phrase as 'the glory of God', and in the second place, if forced to come to terms with the phrase, would have approached it head-on and sought to wrest the meaning from it directly. It is characteristic of Edwards that never once, throughout his life, was he tempted to make use of this simple, direct, and unproductive approach.

Whenever Edwards learned a truth by the coincidence of scripture and his own experience, his response was, again, comparable to that of Jacob at Bethel, when after the dream of the ladder he arose and cried, 'Surely the Lord is in this place; . . . this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven'.<sup>2</sup> To have recognized the presence of God where one had not known it before is not like simply moving forward on a journey from point to point; rather is it like the gentle breaking in of light upon darkness, where boundaries and stages become indefinable and irrelevant and where the light which springs from and envelopes acknowledged nescience is all.

The quietly luminescent passage which Perry Miller sets at the head of his book on Edwards establishes the oblique pattern in even more perceptible and congenial detail.

<sup>1</sup> *Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, rev. ed. (New York [1962]), p. 343.

<sup>2</sup> Gen: 28:16-17.

'When the mind is affected with a thing much, it is led into such schemes of thought about it, as, if they were written down, would seem very impertinent to one that was not affected. It is so in all matters. The scripture falls in with the natural stream of one's thought when the mind is affected with the things of which they speak; but are very wide of their series of thought, who are not affected. For instance, the text that says "one generation passeth away and another cometh, but the earth abideth forever", seems to me in a common frame of mind insipid; the latter part of the verse seems impertinently to be brought in, as what may better tend to illustrate the former: the thought of the earth being the same, does not seem very naturally and affectingly to fall in after the thought of one generation passing, and another coming. What is it to the purpose whether the earth remains the same or not? This makes not the changes of the inhabitants either more or less affecting.

'But yet when, upon an occasion, I was more than ordinarily affected with the passing of one generation after another; how all those, who made such a noise and bluster now, and were so much concerned about their life, would be clean gone off from the face of the earth in sixty or seventy years time, and that the world would be left desolate with respect to them, and that another generation would come on, that would be very little concerned about them, and so one after another: it was particularly affecting to me to think that the earth still remained the same through these changes upon the surface: the same spots of ground, the same mountains and valleys where those things were remaining just as they were, though the actors ceased, and actors just gone. And then this text came into my mind.'

together, that, in fact, he saw their compatibility, indicates once more the quiet primacy of his own continually proliferating experience, which was the only stable referent in a world of warring ideologies, most of which pointed to nothing beyond themselves. This calmness in the face of dualisms is an important bit of evidence to indicate that Edwards did not proceed step by step from one end of the sceptic spectrum to the other, from a despair of knowing to a tortured struggle with dualisms. Rather, his rich and often contradictory experience kept thrusting tentative probes into the nature of truth, and these he related to whatever light he could derive from scripture—sacred or secular. He did not systematically work out the ways of knowing, proceed from nescience through paradox, and then move on to action as the way of breaking a deadlock. Rather, he reminds one of Job, the solution of whose ultimate problem evolved in the light of his overpowering conviction, wrung from the depths of bitter experience, and continually reiterated, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth'. (It was left to Job's friends to supply, like the Arminians of Edwards' day, precise and reasonable but inadequate little answers to a problem whose magnitude they could not conceive.)

Let us stop here for a moment to look at the nature of Edwards' nescience and at his treatment of dualisms, even though he employs neither mechanically or rigidly. Both of these will give us clues to the understanding of his remarkable grasp of paradox, which grows obliquely and almost imperceptibly out of the rich soil of his experience.

As a man who has learned well the difficult lessons of the Renaissance, Edwards is never found lamenting the mutability of his experience. Indeed, he would have been most worried if his experience had ever shown signs of ceasing to change, for then it would have proven useless as a road to knowledge. The very fact that he is continually learning, though often not through any directly applied effort of his own, implies a continuing state of nescience, some of whose borders are always being eaten away while others begin to bulge, eventually to suffer erosion in their turn. Edwards' attitude toward nescience, far from being one of

despair, seems always to echo both the realism and the confidence of the words of Paul: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face . . .'.<sup>1</sup> In a sermon on 'The Pure in Heart', he says (again concerning the glory of God),

'But the more perfect view which the saints have of God's glory and love in another world, is what is especially called the seeing of God. Then they shall see him as he is. That light which now is but as glimmering, will be brought to clear sunshine; that which is here but the dawning, will be perfect day.

'Those intellectual views which will be granted in another world are called seeing God.'<sup>2</sup>

Edwards' predecessors in the seventeenth century had often either lamented that they could not know until they reached the after life or had taken comfort in this conclusion only when they were exhausted from having fought the frustrations of nescience in their earthly existence. Edwards neither underestimates nor bemoans the 'glimmerings' and 'dawnings', for they assuredly imply, he believes, the 'clear sunshine' and the 'perfect day'. Not to be in the process of moving along this pathway would for Edwards argue spiritual stagnation.

Whenever he, like Thomas Browne, recounts changes in his opinions, he reinforces by implication this sense of nescience although the emphasis is always a positive one; it is upon the growing enlightenment rather than upon the receding nescience. Between the vivid account of how he moved from an abhorrence of the doctrine of 'God's absolute sovereignty and justice' to an equally triumphant acceptance of it and his description of the ensuing 'inward sweet delight in God and divine things', Edwards inserts seven words which illuminate for the reader the ambivalent character of these insights and hence bring the reader and writer into intimate contact on the plane of an age-old human experience. After insisting upon his assurance, Edwards

<sup>2</sup> Faust and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. cxi.

<sup>1</sup> I Cor. 13:12.

adds significantly, 'at least it is so at times'.<sup>1</sup> The vision comes and goes, but so expert is Edwards in extracting the meaning of his experience and in setting it in proper perspective that he bridges the waste areas with the confident spans of his faith that what he has once known will reappear in time, made even stronger in proportion to the interval of its absence. So Shelley knew the presence of intellectual beauty intermittently and longed for its abiding presence as his *summum bonum*.

Man were immortal and omnipotent,  
Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,  
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.<sup>2</sup>

When he answers the objections of his opponents to the doctrine of original sin and particularly to God's treating 'Adam and his posterity as *one* in that affair', Edwards in a kind of intellectual desperation (directed not at the problem but at his colleagues) utters one of his most forthright statements of nescience.

'Hence, however the matter be attended with difficulty, *fact* obliges us to *get over* the difficulty, either by finding out some solution, or by shutting our mouths, and acknowledging the weakness and scantiness of our understandings; as we must in innumerable other cases, where apparent and undeniable *fact*, in God's works of creation and providence, is attended with events and circumstances, the *manner* and *reason* of which are difficult to our understandings.'<sup>3</sup>

Francis Bacon was no more insistent upon the sovereignty of a fact than was Edwards although the two might not have agreed upon the definition of a fact—or of experience. Both Bacon and Edwards recognized, however, that the understandings of men seldom prove completely adequate extractors of the meaning of

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Personal Narrative', p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', stanza iv.

<sup>3</sup> Faust and Johnson, *op. cit.*, 'Doctrine of Original Sin Defended', pp. 328-9.



experience. Thomas Browne was no more successful than Edwards was here in teaching his 'haggard and unreclaimed reason to stoop unto the lure of faith'.

In a more relaxed and graceful mood, Edwards is able to use his assumption of nescience to excuse his not meeting all possible arguments of his opponents against the doctrine of the trinity.

'But I don't Pretend fully to explain how these things are & I am sensible a hundred other objections may be made & puzzling doubts & questions Raised that I cant solve. I am far from Pretending to explaining the Trinity so as to Render it no longer a mystery. I think it to be the highest & deepest of all divine mysteries still, notwithstanding anything that I have said or conceived about it. I dont intend to explain the Trinity. But Scripture with Reason may Lead to say something further of it than has been wont to be said, tho there are still Left many things pertaining to it Incomprehensible.'<sup>1</sup>

Here it is 'Scripture with Reason' upon which Edwards relies to illuminate the mystery which he has savoured in his own experience and which remains a stable, albeit inexplicable, point of reference. Far back, behind or beneath the brittle realm of ratiocination lies a certainty which has been proved upon the pulses but which may not yield its secrets to the medium of language. Edwards can say categorically and unabashedly, 'I don't intend to explain the Trinity' and thereby echo Browne's 'I love to lose myself in a mystery'.

One of the practical, if surprising, results of man's nescience Edwards is fond of pointing out. It is that in spite of a reasonable certainty, at which he had early arrived, that the idea of the world is prior to its material existence and that therefore its underpinning is spiritual, we may, in deference to unenlightened human nature, go on talking the old language of common sense.

'Though we suppose, that the existence of the whole material

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'An Essay on the Trinity', p. 381.

Universe is absolutely dependent on Idea, yet we may speak in the old way, and as properly, and as truly as ever. . . . I answer, It is just all one, as to any benefit or advantage, any end that we can suppose was proposed by the Creator as if the Material Universe were existent in the same manner as is vulgarly thought. For the corporeal world it is to no advantage but to the spiritual; and it is exactly the same advantage this way as the other, for it is all one, as to any thing excited in the mind'.<sup>1</sup>

One can imagine that another thinker might have insisted vehemently upon the necessity of his radical idealism's being immediately accepted, in spite of the previous drift of human thought and its common assumptions, but Edwards can handle such matters easily and flexibly because his base is stabilized in that moving spiritual experience which rolls on its own ineluctable way, regardless of what men think of the ultimate structure of the material universe. He can thus at once pay tribute to the common language of unlearned men and recognize that it does not need to be metaphysically sound. The situation is somewhat analogous to that of Milton's Adam, who is admonished by the angel to do what lies before him in daily life and not to concern himself primarily with the ordering of the universe. Again we have a recognition of the 'divided and distinguished worlds' in which man's lot is cast.

Because Edwards' thought does not progress mechanically from nescience to dualisms and thence to paradox but rather proceeds out of the matrix of his 'vital & Experimental Religion',<sup>2</sup> which involves an 'engagedness of the heart',<sup>3</sup> whatever he has to say about dualism reveals a position of unwonted confidence from which pronouncements can be made which still do not have the ring of dogmatism. He is not, like many another sceptic, agoniz-

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Schneider, *The Puritan Mind* (Ann Arbor, Mich. [1958]), quoted from 'Notes on the Mind' from *The Works of President Edwards with a Memoir of His Life* (New York, 1829, I, 669-70), pp. 139-40.

<sup>2</sup> Faust and Johnson, *op. cit.*, 'Narrative of Surprising Conversions', p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Religious Affections', p. 213.

ing in the toils of apparently unresolvable dualisms, but he is rather using the commonly understood language of dualism to make clear the meaning he has derived, by way of paradox, from his experience. As we have seen, he is not troubled by the opposition of God's works and God's word, of the sacred and the secular, nor does he even see this dualism as constituting an intellectual problem. The eirenic drift of his experience leaves him as open to the truth which comes from Locke or Shaftesbury as to that which is based in the scripture of his Puritan heritage. (We have seen an equally insightful indifference in the cultural sensitivity of Spenser.) Like Coleridge, Edwards seems to have conceived of truth as a 'divine ventriloquist', whose leading voice he must always be alert to follow, rather than as a massive structure for whose foundations and for whose every architectural detail he is himself responsible. Hence the flexibility which enables him to make such magnificent use of paradox.

The presence of scepticism in an author's thought is often first detected when his critics comment upon the remarkable co-existence of what seem to be incompatible strains in his work. Both Perry Miller and the editors of selections from Edwards' writings in the American Century Series, Clarence Faust and Thomas Johnson, comment upon the opposing theocratic and humanitarian elements in his thought. To them he seems to have been attempting the impossible, the reconciling of Puritanism with Rousseauistic Romanticism. But we shall not come to understand Edwards unless we move close to the living core of his experience, which was not for him, as it often is for his critics, hedged about with the language and the schematization of intellectual history.

From his earliest writings he assumed and utilized the language of dualism without any sense of strain or any hint of the fact that other and older thinkers had been wrecked on these rocks or had barely slipped by them with their metaphysical barks intact. In his 'Of Being', written at the age of fifteen, after he has discovered Locke, he blithely announces his own position on the hoary problem of body versus spirit and thus sets all his future

critics looking for evidence that he had also read Berkeley. The fact that they have finally decided he did not know Berkeley but arrived independently at this deduction from Locke would probably have puzzled and amused him. He had his eyes fixed on points of reference far other than those of the intellectual historians, and by the light of these points he could draw what would seem, against any other background, an impossibly rash and dogmatic conclusion.

'Corollary. it follows from hence that those beings which have knowledge and Consciousness are the Only Proper and Real And substantial beings, inasmuch as the being of other things is Only by these. from hence we may see the Gross mistake of those who think material things the most substantial beings and spirits more like a shadow, whereas spirits Only Are Properly Substance.'<sup>1</sup>

This may not have been a completely tenable position, but the fact that Edwards had thus early in his philosophical career solved to his own satisfaction the problem of body versus spirit argues a deep well of pondered experience out of which he was continually drawing the materials which would make a coherent whole of his world.

Years later, when Edwards was writing his 'Doctrine of Original Sin Defended', he was still expatiating upon the flesh versus spirit dualism. By this time he had assigned more specific values to the two. Spirit comes to 'immediately depend on man's union and communion with God, or divine communications and influences of God's spirit', and flesh to constitute 'man's nature forsaken of these principles', and as such 'human nature would be human nature still'.<sup>2</sup> These conclusions, with their Platonic overtones, represent merely an expansion and an elaboration of Edwards' early insight into idealism. Stretching between the two, from the time when he first abandoned, under the tutelage of Locke, the fetters of his undergraduate technologia, one senses a rich texture of deeply felt and solemnly pondered experience.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Of Being', p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Doctrine of Original Sin', p. 325.

What went on during those long rides on horseback, from which he returned with scribbled notations pinned to his coat and fluttering in the breeze, is probably much more important for an understanding of the inwardness of his thought than any diagram which can be drawn.

In 'A Divine and Supernatural Light' Edwards becomes explicit about the dualistic nature of 'man's understanding of knowledge of the good that God has made the mind of man capable of'. His analysis is crystal clear, as befits that of an eighteenth-century philosopher, and he betrays no regret that man's intellectual world is set up in the dualistic way in which he describes it.

'The first, that which is merely speculative and notional; as when a person only speculatively judges that any thing is, which, by the agreement of mankind, is called good or excellent, viz., that which is most to general advantage, and between which and a reward there is a suitableness, and the like. And the other is, that which consists in the sense of the heart: as when there is a sense of the beauty, amiableness, or sweetness of a thing; so that the heart is sensible of pleasure and delight in the presence of the idea of it. In the former is exercised merely the speculative faculty, or the understanding, strictly so called, or as spoken of in distinction from the will or disposition of the soul. In the latter, the will, or inclination, or heart, is mainly concerned.'<sup>1</sup>

His use of 'merely' is a clue to the point at which Edwards parts company with the typical rationalistic thinkers of his day and reaches back to a previous age or forward to the coming one for confirmation of the wholeness of his intellectual approach. Here he sets up a distinction without making an invidious comparison. The reader gets the feeling that to abandon either the speculative judgment or 'the sense of the heart' would be inexcusable and yet that somehow the latter, as the more creative, flows about and encompasses the former.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

When Edwards applies this philosophical insight to religion, which is his chief concern, he makes even clearer than before the large outlines and the unique texture of his experience. Agreeing that true religion does not consist wholly in the affections, he insists nevertheless that they must not be disregarded.

'As on the one hand, there must be light in the understanding as well as an affected fervent heart; where there is heat without light; there can be nothing divine or heavenly in that heart; so on the other hand, where there is a kind of light without heat, a head stored with notions and speculations, with a cold and unaffected heart, there can be nothing divine in that light, that knowledge is no true spiritual knowledge of divine things. If the great things of religion are rightly understood, they will affect the heart.'<sup>1</sup>

That Edwards exercised an almost instinctive *isosothenia*, always a sign that the lessons of dualism have been well learned, is evidenced by his proceeding from this point to an examination of the kinds of purportedly religious affections in order to discover what tentative standards can be set up for their identification. He seems here to be explicating the words of Jesus, 'Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.'<sup>2</sup> Edwards emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing among religious affections in order to separate the truly 'gracious' from the others. His ultimate test, which is itself not intellectual but activist, is the degree to which 'Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice . . . that they cause that a practice, which is universally conformed to and directed by Christian rules, should be the practice and business

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Religious Affections' p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 7:21-23.

of his [the Christian's] life.<sup>1</sup> The difference between false and true religious affections is that between death and life.

'Christ is not in the heart of a saint, as in a sepulchre, or as a dead saviour, that does nothing; but as in his temple, and as one that is alive from the dead.'<sup>2</sup>

To know Christ, as Paul had said, is to know 'the power of his resurrection'.

'Hence saving affections, though oftentimes they do not make so great a noise and show as others, yet have in them a secret solidity, life, and strength, whereby they take hold of, and carry away the heart, leading it into a kind of captivity.'<sup>3</sup>

It is one of the paradoxes of Christianity that to be in a certain kind of captivity is to be truly free.

. . . for I  
Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.<sup>4</sup>

One of the recurrent themes of Perry Miller's vibrant book on Edwards is that from the standpoint of intellectual history Edwards was continually working at the mediation between, the coordination, and indeed the uniting of opposites.

'This coördination of utility and glory in the very act of perception was the great, the original and creative result of Edwards' deep immersion in Locke.'<sup>5</sup>

But in addition to Locke and perception there are Newton and natural law.

<sup>1</sup> Faust and Johnson, *op. cit.*, 'Religious Affections', pp. 249-50.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>4</sup> John Donne, 'Batter my heart . . .'

<sup>5</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

'Edwards saw exactly where the modern problem is centered, upon this incompatibility of Newton and Locke, of the objective and the subjective, of the mechanical and the conscious. The effort of his life was to unite the two.'<sup>1</sup>

We have heard Edwards insisting upon the equal necessity of head and heart. So he continually sought 'mediation between knowledge and faith, science and ethics, intellect and the heart.'<sup>2</sup> But these were not to be put together in the cold light of pure reason, for Edwards never lost his hold on the ambivalence and complexity of experience.

'We must make no mistake about Edwards: he did not propose, by combining the reason and the emotions, to form a whole man. He dismissed that kind of thinking as hopelessly schematic, and asserted the radical conception of man as an active, interested, passionate being, whose relation to objective reality is factual to the extent that he is concerned about it, whose anxieties and not his clear thinking make his destiny.'<sup>3</sup>

One of the reasons why, according to Miller, Edwards made the mystery of grace 'so nearly comprehensible that it became terrifying'<sup>4</sup> was that he 'wove the supernatural into the natural, the rational into the emotional'.<sup>5</sup>

The focal point of all Edwards' dualisms was the opposition between the objective good represented for him by Newton and the inherent represented by Locke. As Miller sums up the situation,

'If the inherent good is excellency and pleasure, while the objective good is the possession and enjoyment of that object which is good for the organism, is there not an incurable conflict between the two? Perception, either as pleasure or as beauty, is value, but if it is illusion, then reality is only the dance of atoms. The

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.



civilization of more than New England was at stake if the life of the spirit was henceforth to be a civil war between atoms and perceptions. Unless Edwards could merge, or at least reconcile, his objective good and his inherent, neither he nor, as he saw the predicament, anyone else would be able to locate the good where it might be of help to mankind.<sup>1</sup>

After a lifetime of thinking and monitoring both his own deepest experience and that of others, Edwards finally in his Stockbridge exile came to set forth his

‘. . . affirmation that the beauty of holiness is one with the nature of the objective universe. . . . Man lives on the plane both of the objective good and of the inherent, not because he is both body and soul, but because he is one being, and the law of his life is that he must perceive things, yet as he perceives them, so they are and so he is. . . . By the uniformity of the cosmos, “diverse things become as it were one”, and in the system of things even the fundamental distinction between the speculative and the sensible is merged into the pure beauty which is the final goal both of the reason and of the heart.’<sup>2</sup>

It was here in ‘The Nature of True Virtue’, written when Edwards was set apart by exile from the exigencies of controversy, that he was able to come to this serene and far-ranging conclusion. The reader today continually hears echoes of Milton’s free-will speculations in the reasoning of Edwards in ‘Concerning the End for which God created the World’ that

‘By grace man is lifted into the perception of a coincidence of the objective order of pleasure with the inherent order of virtue, and discovers from afar that both converge in beauty. But God Himself is eternally both orders in one, for He alone can choose the motive with which His volition shall be connected. In Him are reconciled

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 291-2.

necessity and freedom, because He selects the necessity to which He submits Himself.<sup>1</sup>

Edwards, like Milton, never forgets the distance between God and man nor underestimates the difficulty with which man lifts himself or God draws him up to a plane where the wills of the two coincide—in the beauty of holiness.

Much of what Edwards has to say about 'the nature of true virtue' sounds like variations on the theme of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Thy will, not mine, be done". It elaborates the core of truth which one always feels at the heart of Leibnitz's or Pope's optimism, but in these authors the expression itself is much too pat and glib to be taken as seriously as it perhaps should be. They are making statements about 'the best of all possible worlds' from the direct rather than from the oblique point of view. Men, Edwards felt, are 'enmeshed in the system of things. He gave them no other redemption than their own appreciation of the system that holds them.'<sup>2</sup> Yet Edwards' appreciation is far different from Pope's. Early in his career Edwards had wrought a phrase which proved a forecast of his ultimate conception of the excellent in both art and morals (which he never disjoined, for all his Puritanism):

"*The Consent of Being to Being, or Being's Consent to Entity.*" A firm rule of aesthetics and of morality followed: "The more the Consent is, and the more extensive, the greater is the Excellency."<sup>3</sup>

At one end of the scale is utter rebellion against the scheme of things prompted by not the least insight into its beauty, and at the other end complete because enlightened acceptance of an order transcending and revealing as *maya* the irrelevant desires of the 'little, convulsive self.'

"The love of self can be extended indefinitely (just as the particle can be indefinitely subdivided), from the self to family, to town,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

to nation, and still not become the perception of love, not until the mind leaps from all specific loves to a love of all being. Out of selfishness arises a disinterested benevolence that adores the order in which the self is one without reference to that self's particular pleasures—or pains.<sup>1</sup>

There are overtones here of a voice which Edwards could not have heard—except in the wide realm of the universal spirit. It is the voice of the Upanishads:

‘Verily, creatures are not dear that you may love the creatures; but that you may love the Self through the creatures, therefore are creatures dear.’<sup>2</sup>

The beauty of the whole draws the individual into conformity with itself.

‘... the self-contained and illimitable unit of virtue, which is the beauty that cannot be defined, is the entire universe. For this system, there is indeed an adequate statesman, who so defines His love of self that it perfectly comprehends and furthers the welfare of all. God’s private ambition is the universal system of benevolence. Among men, only those who perceive and take to heart this paradox achieve the moral ability to will in conformity with Him who is all in all, “in comparison of whom all the rest is nothing, and with regard to whom all other things are to be viewed, and their minds be accordingly impressed and affected”.’<sup>3</sup>

Milton’s theories of creation are again recalled when Miller makes the following judgment concerning Edwards:

‘This thesis of an emanation of God for the pure joy of creation, in which the creatures find their justification by yielding consent to the beauty of the whole even though it slay them, will be

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>2</sup> *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, II, 4, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-6.

recognized as his approximation to a spiritual vision that the saints, Augustine or Pascal, have variously expressed.<sup>1</sup>

Augustine, Pascal and Edwards, varied as the details of their systematic thought may have been, had in common a vivid experience of the complexity and paradoxical quality of man's relationship to God. Out of such experience they wrought the truths by which they sought to signal hope to their fellows, always on the verge of being swallowed in solipsistic night. Schneider says of Edwards:

'He lived out completely in his own soul the whole Puritan philosophy, and became absolutely convinced on the basis of his own experience that the doctrine was sound.'<sup>2</sup>

It is evident, as we have noted above, that Edwards' experience was the well-spring of his philosophy and theology. Because that experience was for him clothed in beauty, harmony, proportion, and love, he must try to set forth such concepts in his philosophy if he was to share his illuminating experience with his fellows. He must often have gratefully smiled up into the face of God as the conviction of some new harmony in the universe dawned upon him, and out of this recognition (not from a logically tight system of thought) came strength to support him through many days of struggle and hardship. He was herein true to the central precept of his Grandfather Stoddard, the details of whose theology he often treated cavalierly, as Stoddard had treated that of his own ancestors: "Experience fits men to teach others."<sup>3</sup>

The most striking evidence that all Edwards' most exalted thought, including its intellectual formulations, flows from a source in dynamic action is to be found in his speculations concerning the trinity. What has always proven a stumbling block to deists and others who have approached it without paying adequate tribute to the quite irrational religious affections, the doctrine of one God in three persons has always intrigued the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301-2.

<sup>2</sup> Schneider, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

more oblique thinker, who has delighted in working out its permutations, often approaching it from far out at the edges of his experience instead of attacking it at close quarters, where only simple intellectual operations can be performed. Edwards in 'An Essay on the Trinity', after presenting the Father and the Son as 'mutually Loving & delighting in each other', goes on to what may strike conventional theologians with an impact similar to that of William Blake's unique and often disturbing theology.

'This is the eternal & most Perfect & essential act of the divine nature, wherein the Godhead acts to an Infinite degree and in the most Perfect manner Possible. The deity becomes all act, the divine essence it self flows out & is as it were breathed forth in Love & Joy. So that the Godhead therin stands forth in yet another manner of subsistence, and there Proceeds the 3d Person in the Trinity, the holy spirit, viz. the Deity in act, for there is no other act but the act of the will.'<sup>1</sup>

Among a multitude of confusing and more or less insightful speculations concerning the trinity, this one stands out by its unadorned simplicity and relevance. 'The Deity in act' is perhaps at once the most stark and the most suggestive definition of the Holy Spirit in the theological commentaries of Western Christendom. It serves for the purposes of this discussion to reveal the deep-lying springs out of which Edwards' action-directed theology arises.

The problem faced by such thinkers as Edwards is always, as Montaigne early recognized, to find the means of communicating with their fellows, accustomed as the latter are to assuming that the truth can be easily and simply arrived at and that it can be transmitted by means of words. What the Pyrrhonists need, Montaigne has said, is a new language, for they 'can by no manner of speech expresse their Generall conceit'.<sup>2</sup> He implies thereby

<sup>1</sup> Faust and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

<sup>2</sup> 'An Apologie of *Raymond Sebond*', in *Essayes of Montaigne*, tr. J. Florio (New York; London 1948), II, 233.

recognized as his approximation to a spiritual vision that the saints, Augustine or Pascal, have variously expressed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301-2.

<sup>2</sup> Schneider, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

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that the language we know is one designed to make simple assertions, whereas the sceptic can never put his truths in the form of simple assertions unless he balances each one with its opposite and hence creates a paradox. Even then, he ends with the assertion that he doubts, which is in itself vulnerable as a simple assertion. The language of prose as we know it is simply not an adequate vehicle for the transmission of truths which must remain close to experience in order not to lose their vibrancy.

It is well known that Edwards faced this problem in the construction of his sermons. In 'Notes on the Mind' he had early foreseen the increasing inadequacy of words.

'... we have got so far beyond those things for which language was chiefly contrived, that, unless we use extreme caution, we cannot speak, except we speak exceeding unintelligibly, without literally contradicting ourselves.'<sup>1</sup>

Reading Locke made it clear to Edwards that God's way of communicating with his children is by 'indirection, which is the only way, because speaking the unspeakable is impossible'.<sup>2</sup> Following Locke's insight that only in so far as the senses are involved does man come to understand with his whole being, he tried always to present his ideas as nakedly as possible and so to induce in his hearers the experience he was holding before them instead of leaving them with merely a second-hand account which they might manipulate intellectually without becoming themselves vitally involved with it.

Behind what Perry Miller calls the sensationalism of Edwards' preaching lay an attempt to push the current over-intellectualized concern with religion in the direction of primary religious experience and so salvage all the important elements which had been lost between the multifarious experience and the bald Q.E.D. William James' concentration many years later on the 'varieties of religious experience' was a tribute to this same point of view.

<sup>1</sup> Schneider, *op. cit.*, 'Notes on the Mind', p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

Taking his lead from Locke but going on beyond him, Edwards worked out 'his thesis that an idea is the fashion in which the heart apprehends an idea and so acts toward the object'<sup>1</sup>—a thoroughly dynamic and Existentialist conception.

In his early sermons, Edwards employed a kind of double talk since his understanding of perception was completely Lockean and yet he spoke to his congregation in the accustomed phrases, which now for him had a luminosity of which his hearers were unaware. On another level, as Miller puts it,

'When Edwards stood up among the New England clergy, it was as though a master of relativity spoke to a convention of Newtonians who had not yet heard of Einstein, or as though among nineteenth-century professors of philosophy, all assuming that man is rational and responsible, a strange youth began to refer, without more ado, to the id, ego, and super-ego.'<sup>2</sup>

It is no wonder that 'his auditors [both congregation and clergy] . . . were aware of some wondrous mystery . . .'.<sup>3</sup> Perception itself, for Edwards, came to be 'the way a man conducts himself in the face of reality'.<sup>4</sup> Edwards apparently felt it was not necessary that his hearers should have the Lockean key, which Chauncy lacked in arguing with Edwards about the Awakening. In the meantime Edwards could go on exploring the uses of this approach for the purpose of understanding the world of men and of God's other creations and seeking language to convey to others what he had learned.

That Locke stands on the one hand, through what he says about words, with Bishop Sprat and the crusaders for simple and direct speech, where words have no confusing overtones, and that he should at the same time bear the responsibility for Edwards' very different conception and use of words is one of the anomalies of intellectual history. Its explanation lies not in Locke but in the rare insight and sensitivity of Edwards, whose

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.



that the language we know is one designed to make simple assertions, whereas the sceptic can never put his truths in the form of simple assertions unless he balances each one with its opposite and hence creates a paradox. Even then, he ends with the assertion that he doubts, which is in itself vulnerable as a simple assertion. The language of prose as we know it is simply not an adequate vehicle for the transmission of truths which must remain close to experience in order not to lose their vibrancy.

It is well known that Edwards faced this problem in the construction of his sermons. In 'Notes on the Mind' he had early foreseen the increasing inadequacy of words.

'... we have got so far beyond those things for which language was chiefly contrived, that, unless we use extreme caution, we cannot speak, except we speak exceeding unintelligibly, without literally contradicting ourselves.'<sup>1</sup>

Reading Locke made it clear to Edwards that God's way of communicating with his children is by 'indirection, which is the only way, because speaking the unspeakable is impossible'.<sup>2</sup> Following Locke's insight that only in so far as the senses are involved does man come to understand with his whole being, he tried always to present his ideas as nakedly as possible and so to induce in his hearers the experience he was holding before them instead of leaving them with merely a second-hand account which they might manipulate intellectually without becoming themselves vitally involved with it.

Behind what Perry Miller calls the sensationalism of Edwards' preaching lay an attempt to push the current over-intellectualized concern with religion in the direction of primary religious experience and so salvage all the important elements which had been lost between the multifarious experience and the bald Q.E.D. William James' concentration many years later on the 'varieties of religious experience' was a tribute to this same point of view.

<sup>1</sup> Schneider, *op. cit.*, 'Notes on the Mind', p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

Taking his lead from Locke but going on beyond him, Edwards worked out 'his thesis that an idea is the fashion in which the heart apprehends an idea and so acts toward the object'<sup>1</sup>—a thoroughly dynamic and Existentialist conception.

In his early sermons, Edwards employed a kind of double talk since his understanding of perception was completely Lockean and yet he spoke to his congregation in the accustomed phrases, which now for him had a luminosity of which his hearers were unaware. On another level, as Miller puts it,

'When Edwards stood up among the New England clergy, it was as though a master of relativity spoke to a convention of Newtonians who had not yet heard of Einstein, or as though among nineteenth-century professors of philosophy, all assuming that man is rational and responsible, a strange youth began to refer, without more ado, to the id, ego, and super-ego.'<sup>2</sup>

It is no wonder that 'his auditors [both congregation and clergy] . . . were aware of some wondrous mystery . . .'.<sup>3</sup> Perception itself, for Edwards, came to be 'the way a man conducts himself in the face of reality'.<sup>4</sup> Edwards apparently felt it was not necessary that his hearers should have the Lockean key, which Chauncy lacked in arguing with Edwards about the Awakening. In the meantime Edwards could go on exploring the uses of this approach for the purpose of understanding the world of men and of God's other creations and seeking language to convey to others what he had learned.

That Locke stands on the one hand, through what he says about words, with Bishop Sprat and the crusaders for simple and direct speech, where words have no confusing overtones, and that he should at the same time bear the responsibility for Edwards' very different conception and use of words is one of the anomalies of intellectual history. Its explanation lies not in Locke but in the rare insight and sensitivity of Edwards, whose

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

vivid experience seized upon and made use of the most diverse and seemingly incompatible materials. His sermons are therefore 'direct, frontal attacks upon epistemological doubt',<sup>1</sup> and this is one reason why they concern us in a study of sceptical outcroppings. In order to know as he was known, Edwards felt that the Christian would have to be somehow pushed into the arena of religious experience and so enabled to work out his own salvation. As Perry Miller says of Edwards' sermons,

'They are experimental wrestlings with the two gigantic issues of modern philosophy: of the link between the objective and the subjective; and of semantics itself—of how words can be manipulated so that, despite their radical unlikeness to concepts, they will convey trustworthy ideas.'<sup>2</sup>

As Edwards put it, his purpose was '“To extricate all questions from least confusion or ambiguity of words, so that the ideas shall be left naked”'.<sup>3</sup> If this aim were not read against a background of Edwards' religious experience, it would seem to describe almost perfectly the purposes of his opponents the Arminians. The difference is that Edwards' goal evolved from the 'naked, thinking heart' while that of the Arminians sprang from the naked intellect, which had somehow in the late seventeenth century become disengaged from the wholeness of living experience and had begun to operate in precarious independence. Before we look in more minute detail at the subtle but radical differences between the two points of view, let us see the kinds of paradoxes Edwards makes use of in his despair of language's inadequacy, remembering their origins in experience rather than in sheer intellect.

As Perry Miller tries to elucidate Edwards' conception of history and distinguish it from the kind of emergent evolution in which the Arminians put their trust, he strikes out a sentence which might very well serve as a motto for Edwards' outstanding paradoxes:

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

'History to him is full, if not of contradictions, then at least of ambiguities and hesitations, which are not resolved in history; instead, the meaning of history is found in their resolutions.'<sup>1</sup>

The sentence reflects the changing and on-going character of Edwards' thinking, its recognition of contradictions, and its struggling toward their resolution, even if that can be expressed verbally only by means of paradox. On the plane of daily, simple, easily grasped human experience, where the reason reigns supreme (that is, in history), the resolution will never be encountered, and hence one can never settle down with satisfactory answers to even a few of the world's basic questions. Only out of continually burgeoning experience, raised to a power which neither the Puritans nor Locke foresaw, could be wrung such paradoxical truths as it was possible for Edwards to attain, those oblique insights for which his life was the explication and which to the eye of simple reason seemed manifestly absurd. Edwards' experience had encompassed both points of view, and therefore he could sympathize with his opponents but only as with those who have never grown up. Sometimes he had faith in their eventual maturity, and sometimes he despaired of it. In his 'Personal Narrative' is the detailed account of how he moved almost imperceptibly from an abhorrence of the doctrine of God's sovereignty and predestination to an awareness of its rightness and inevitability.

'From my childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me. But I remember the time very well, when I seemed to be convinced, and fully satisfied, as to this sovereignty of God, and his justice in thus eternally disposing of men, according to his sovereign pleasure. But never could give an account, how, or by what means, I was

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

thus convinced, not in the least imagining at the time, nor a long time after, that there was any extraordinary influence of God's Spirit in it; but only that now I saw further, and my reason apprehended the justice and reasonableness of it.<sup>1</sup>

What had happened to Edwards here was that he had moved from the direct approach of simple reason to the oblique approach which took into consideration a larger 'justice and reasonableness' and through which the doctrine of God's sovereignty came to appeal to his whole being as eminently satisfying because he could at last estimate the span between God's ways and those of man.

'God's absolute sovereignty and justice, with respect to salvation and damnation, is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of any thing that I see with my eyes; at least it is so at times. But I have often, since that first conviction, had quite another kind of sense of God's sovereignty than I had then. I have often since had not only a conviction, but a delightful conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceedingly pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God. But my first conviction was not so.'<sup>2</sup>

The joy with which Edwards came to embrace this doctrine bore no resemblance to the crude and shocking and callous self-gratulation of the saved in Michael Wigglesworth's *Day of Doom*, who joyfully watched members of their own families descending into Hell at the Last Judgment. Edwards' joy has rather the flavour of the absurd, but the absurd with a deep-lying significance, like the foolishness which Erasmus praised. Indeed, both Erasmus and Edwards derived their paradoxes from the same fountainhead in the New Testament. Edwards is fond of referring to the prayer of Jesus, '... I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight.'<sup>3</sup> Whether the perception on

<sup>1</sup> Faust and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:21.

Edwards' part of the sovereignty of God may properly be called mystical is perhaps debatable, but at least his report of the experience has the same 'feel' as the words of Christ. Edwards had the same suspicion as Paul of whatever did not appear to be 'the foolishness of God'.<sup>1</sup>

Often there seems to be no direct connection between the text he is concentrating upon and the glowing rapture into which it draws him. He was not, in other words, looking for proof texts. What came to him repeatedly was the loveliness and beauty of the Canticles, where an 'inward sweetness' came over him as he read. His description of these experiences is reminiscent of the Sufi love poetry which lifts the soul from earthly to heavenly love. Edwards' eloquence is that of all mystics, and it ends as theirs does in the inexpressible—which the exigencies of theology forced him to cast in paradoxical form.

'This I know not how to express otherwise, than by a calm, sweet abstraction of soul from all the concerns of this world; and sometimes a kind of vision, or fixed ideas and imaginations, of being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, far from all mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in God. The sense I had of divine things, would often of a sudden kindle up, as it were, a sweet burning in my heart; an ardour of soul, that I know not how to express.'<sup>2</sup>

He was able to look up into the sky above his father's pasture and sense both the majesty and the grace of God, 'a majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high, great, and holy gentleness'.<sup>3</sup> That Edwards sometimes in his actions gave more evidence of the majesty than of the gentleness and humility is attributable only to the fact that he too was human and therefore unable to sustain his high visions, unable always to become as a little child. He recognized this capability in others, however, and paid high

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 1:25.

<sup>2</sup> Faust and Johnson, *op. cit.*, 'Personal Narrative', p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

tribute to it—as when he edited the papers of David Brainerd, who symbolized for him “this one grand principle, on which depends the whole difference between Calvinists and Arminians”, which is simply the discovery of the beauty of God “as supremely excellent in itself”.<sup>1</sup> Brainerd’s piety embraced the love of God for His own sake and not in gratitude for God’s having loved Brainerd. Thus he was far removed from the ‘this for that’ philosophy of the Arminians, where all was tidy and the books balanced.

Edwards’s paradoxes, which tended like all paradoxes to the absurd, were comparable to Milton’s prescription of obedience for Adam. Both implied nescience which had been lived with so long that one was flexible enough to embrace paradoxes tending to absurdity (Milton’s was the paradox that to obey is to be free), for the nescient man had no ‘security’ to risk. Truth might appear from the most unexpected directions, and one should first have stripped himself of all encumbrances in order to be free to embrace it. To the Arminian defenders of the simple, the clear, and the direct, this approach was horrifying.

‘Edwards scientifically, deliberately, committed Puritanism, which had been a fervent rationalism of the covenant, to a pure passion of the senses, and the terror he imparted was the terror of modern man, the terror of insecurity. He overthrew the kind of religious philosophy that had dominated Western Europe since the fall of Rome, the system wherein there was always—whether in terms of the City of God, or of the Mass and absolution, or of final causes and substantial forms, or, at the last, in terms of the Puritan covenant—an ascertainable basis for human safety.’<sup>2</sup>

It is significant that Charles Chauncy, one of Edwards’ chief opponents, who had made his way on to the convenient raft of Arminianism from what he felt was the sinking ship of Puritanism, was known to have been unable to understand Milton. As Edwards had said,

<sup>1</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

' "There is need of uncommon force of mind to discern the distinguishing excellencies of the works of authors of great genius"—notably Milton, where those things that appear tasteless to mean judges "are his inimitable excellencies in the eyes of those who are of great discerning and better taste".'<sup>1</sup>

Discernment and taste the Arminians always distrusted, for they were nebulous and impossible to codify or lay low by disputation.

From the paradox of God's sovereignty follows the paradox of man's grace, and the two are but obverse sides of a recognition that man's ways are naturally very different from God's but that at rare moments it is possible for the two to coincide or for man to come within hailing distance of God's purposes. Man can see 'the coincidence' (as we have shown) 'of the objective order of pleasure with the inherent order of virtue' and that 'both converge in beauty'.<sup>2</sup> The impossibly separated have come together, and truth is generated by their contact. The regenerate man by receiving the gift of the idea of the supernatural is enabled to see what he could never have seen before and what no argumentation could have shown him, just as Edwards in his father's pasture slowly saw his field of vision becoming wider and deeper—and significantly did not know that this was grace at work within him. Because a process such as this one is involved wherever men come upon religious insights, it is probably true that religion is more often caught than taught. In this respect it is akin to that literary appreciation whose difficulty Edwards attributed to lack of 'uncommon force of mind'.

In stark contrast with the schematized *technologiae* which college students were required in Edwards' day to work out was the paradox of redemption as Edwards evolved it from his understanding of the Lockean psychology in its interplay with his own vibrant experience.

'Grasped in simplicity, not as a collegiate thesis, the Christian insight is what Locke called a simple idea, an irreducible unit of

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.



experience, one in kind with redness, with the taste of honey, and with pain. It is not a content, but a frame of conception; it is a consent, not to a syllogism or a covenant, but to an experienced "taste" or "relish" which cannot be gainsaid. Regeneration is the convergence of the two orders upon a single perception, of the order of causes along with the order of morality, so that simultaneously there is given "union to a proper object—and a relish of the object". Redemption is a flash of experience, forever abiding, in which natural good and moral good merge in a sense of the real good.<sup>1</sup>

Here again one can describe redemption from without but can never point precisely toward it except by means of paradox. The combined psychological perceptivity of Edwards and Perry Miller can only play a kind of thought-inducing music which hopefully may lead their readers to perceive the truth for themselves.

'It [redemption] usually connotes something added to the previous store, a new substance materialized out of nowhere, but Edwards' point was that for the truly perceptive there has been no more, possibly even less, of a fund of experience than for others, only that into such natures, "either old or new", is laid a method of making coherent what before was incoherent. Though it is always available to the natural man, he can no more employ it than "a man without the sense of hearing can conceive of the melody of a tune". It is, said Edwards in a sentence that proved as enigmatic to his followers as to his enemies, "a natural habit or foundation for action".<sup>2</sup>

Gradually or suddenly in redemption, the world in all its ambiguities and hesitations smooths out, and the meaning of history, which is not in history, begins to emerge, and for the first time meaningful action is possible. The individual is set squarely not in the midst of a paradise of answered questions but

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

on a road which will in itself, whenever he travels along it, constitute the answer to all questions because as a regenerate man he can begin to take in the scheme of things, quite apart from his own needs and wants, as the perfection which it is in the eyes of God. This perfection, for Edwards, constitutes the moral world, the end for which the rest of the world was created, 'as a house is prepared for the inhabitants'.<sup>1</sup> He follows this observation with his central definition of 'true virtue', which again points up the glory of God.

'By these things it appears, that a truly virtuous mind, being as it were under the sovereign dominion of love to God, above all things, seeks the glory of God, and makes this his supreme, governing, and ultimate end. This consists in the expression of God's perfections in their proper effects, the manifestation of God's glory to created understandings, the communications of the infinite fulness of God to the creature—the creature's highest esteem of God, love to, and joy in him—and in the proper exercises and expressions of these. And so far as a virtuous mind exercises true virtue in benevolence to created beings, it chiefly seeks the good of the creature; consisting in its knowledge or view of God's glory and beauty, its union with God, conformity and love to him, and joy in him. And that disposition of heart, that consent, union, or propensity of mind to being in general, which appears chiefly in such exercises, is *virtue*, truly so called; or in other words, true *grace* and real *holiness*. And no other disposition or affection but this is of the nature of virtue.'<sup>2</sup>

From the perspective which is furnished by our position in history, we can understand, even when we do not sympathize with, the bewilderment, insecurity, and hence opposition with which men of an Arminian bent of mind greeted such a statement as this—a statement which is itself understandable in the light of

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor, Mich.; London [1965]), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.

our tracing of Edwards' own variation of creative scepticism. The clash with a simply rational and moralistic approach to virtue elaborated by men whose sense of the ambiguities of life had been dulled was inevitable. The Arminians wanted the kind of formula which would forestall further questions and not the kind which would constitute 'a natural habit or foundation for action'. That they were totally unprepared, therefore, to understand Edwards' position on the freedom of the will was entirely consistent with their inability to grasp the inwardness of his definition of virtue.

Edwards enunciated his paradoxical position on the freedom of the will when he avowed that man can do whatever he wills but that he cannot will whatever he wills. The similarities to and differences from the position of Milton are striking. Both men argue for the non-interference of God in man's decision-making, Milton by insisting that God's foreknowledge in no way prejudices man's choice and Edwards by taking Calvin more seriously and building up a logical case to prove that since the chain of causation behind man's actions must somewhere have a stop, it must be anchored in the nature of the individual. This nature although given by God is left solely the responsibility of man, who may be as justly blamed for sin as God, whose nature is necessarily good, should be praised for His goodness. For Edwards, man in trying to achieve that love to Being in general wherein true virtue consists confronts the essential paradox of the universe, that he is somehow responsible even for his own nature, which requires the introduction of an inexplicable supernatural idea in order to bring it progressively into line with God's view and love of the universe. Indeed, Edwards' freedom seems to be underpinned and made meaningful by the strength of necessity. On this basis he put squarely upon the individual the responsibility 'not for overcoming obstacles nor for constructing churches and factories, but for being the kind of person he is'.<sup>1</sup> A man is blameworthy not on account of what he has been pushed into but for having acted upon 'the choice of the heart'.

<sup>1</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

That his freedom to make this choice is not absolute and unlimited but is firmly fixed in the moral necessity of the universe is Edwards's paradox of free will, wherein he hopes to include all the contradictory facts of human experience.

'Only in the perception of what things go unavoidably and fatally together has suffering any dignity or experience any harvest. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Miller reinforces one important distinction between Edwards and the Arminians when he exposes Daniel Whitby's insistence that man is his own cause and that the finite and rationally ordered world is adequate to account for him. Whitby declared

'... that man loves what he decides to love, and could not understand that he can love only what he knows how to love.'<sup>2</sup>

Changing a man's heart, by whatever means, is indispensable if he is ever to turn his love toward other and more worthy objects.

In contrast to all this is the 'free and catholic spirit' of the Arminians, whose shallow dogmatism stood in the way of their nescience, who were never willing to admit the clash of dualisms in creative paradox, and who based their conception of truth upon the speculative understanding rather than upon experience. The resulting simplification, which issued morally in a picayune calculus of the greatest good for the greatest number, won the day, and Edwards with his experience-based and hence oblique and vital insights was momentarily thrust aside. The rationalism which triumphed and which was to characterize eighteenth-century thought in both England and America solved its problems by discarding or choosing not to see half the facts. What strikes us today as intellectual arrogance and conceit in the typical simplicity of eighteenth-century thought was enough to buoy it up for a time in a kind of precarious face-saving until the oncoming wave of Romanticism washed over it.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

'Out of Edwards' work might be compiled an indictment of the eighteenth century that would rival Blake's and delight the heart of every Romantic.'<sup>1</sup>

Edwards fought fire with fire and in his famous refutation of Thomas Chubb in 'The Freedom of the Will' demonstrated *ad absurdum* how inconsistent and meaninglessly contradictory the Arminians' system was. Their conception of an act, he insisted, was,

'... that it should be necessary and not necessary; that it should be from a cause, and no cause; that it should be the fruit of choice and design, and not the fruit of choice and design; that it should be the beginning of motion or exertion, and yet consequent on previous exertion; that it should be before it is; that it should spring immediately out of indifference and equilibrium, and yet be the effect of preponderation; that it should be self-originated, and also have its original from something else; that it is what the mind causes itself, of its own Will, and can produce or prevent, according to its choice or pleasure, and yet what the mind has no power to prevent, it precluding all previous choice in the affair.'<sup>2</sup>

Unwilling to confine himself, as Chubb and the Arminians had, to abstractions, Edwards the Lockean set forth the same objections in a language which his opponents could not disregard and which he knew would embarrass them by its appeal to the kind of experience which they felt, as sophisticated thinkers, they had gone beyond.

'If some learned philosopher, who had been abroad, in giving an account of the curious observations he had made in his travels, should say, "He had been in *Terra del Fuego*, and there had seen an animal, which he calls by a certain name, that begat and brought forth itself, and yet had a sire and dam distinct from itself; that it had an appetite, and was hungry before it had a being; that his

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> Faust and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

master, who led him, and governed him at his pleasure, was always governed by him and driven by him, where he pleased; that when he moved, he always took a step before the first step; that he went with his head first, and yet always went tail foremost; and this, though he had neither head nor tail": it would be no imprudence at all, to tell such a traveller, though a learned man, that he himself had no notion or idea of such an animal, as he gave an account of, and never had, nor ever would have.<sup>1</sup>

The simple directness of the Arminians' arguments to prove that 'Whatever is, is right' hides beneath the surface this kind of logical chaos, very different from the realm of the paradoxical and the oblique where Edwards operated and where they accused him of contradictions because they could not see the movement of his arguments. It was Edwards, however, and not the Arminians who had a finger on the human pulse.

'Edwards' realism is firmly planted upon an indomitable knowledge that pain is pain, and he would not degrade mankind by pretending that for the living, death is not evil.'<sup>2</sup>

The arrogance of the Arminians had catapulted them on to a plane where they were sure they could see as God sees, and from that vantage point all the world's problems seemed easily solved. The men below, however, struggling under the weight of their problems, felt the whip of insult in this high-handed moralizing. Though Edwards frightened them, he at least took seriously their dilemmas. His paradoxes, puzzling as they were to the Arminian mentality, corresponded to something just as puzzling within the human psyche, and so they survive to intrigue and strengthen.

The Arminians thought they were glorifying God by their patronizing commendation of a world where 'Whatever is, is right' since they themselves apparently knew little of this world and hence could disregard that of their neighbours. Such glorification of God in the Arminian fashion is far from

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 297-8.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

from Edwards' early experience as he relates it in his 'Personal Narrative'.

'The first instance that I remember of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, I Tim. 1:17. *Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory, for ever and ever, Amen.* As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before. . . . I kept saying, and as it were singing over these words of scripture to myself; and went to pray to God that I might enjoy him, and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do; with a new sort of affection. But it never came into my thought, that there was any thing spiritual, or of a saving nature in this.'<sup>1</sup>

Edwards had transformed his ancestors' conviction that they were God's chosen people set down in the wilderness to establish a Hebraic theocracy into a firm trust that the words of God on his throne in the New Jerusalem, 'Behold, I make all things new,'<sup>2</sup> were to be taken literally by men living on a frontier whose opposite border stretched to the Orient and that the regenerate American had a unique mission as he moved into the unknown both physically and spiritually, leaving far behind him the simple and unfeeling self-gratulation of those unwilling to launch out from the false security of their own precarious dogmatisms. There they have been embalmed and lost to posterity while Jonathan Edwards has emerged triumphantly as the great American master of the creative paradox.

<sup>1</sup> Faust and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 21:5.

## VI

# THE INDIAN SHAPE OF COLERIDGE'S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT



ON one of those occasions when Samuel Taylor Coleridge was reviewing the course of his life's thought and planning what books he would write to give it a local habitation and a name, he struck out a significant title for what was conceived as 'a dramatic and popular form' of his thought's core. It was to be called 'Travels in Body and Mind, or the Sceptic's Pilgrimage to the Temple of Truth'.<sup>1</sup> No such volume can today be located in the bibliography of Coleridge, but materials which would have gone into it are scattered throughout his published and unpublished works. The significance of the proposed title lies in the hints it provides concerning the way in which the material might have been organized. There is ample evidence that Coleridge thought of the intellectual life, which he usually did not compartmentalize into the sacred and the secular, as a solemn journey undertaken by human beings, curiously composed of body and mind, toward the holy place where Truth has its dwelling. The means of transportation consisted of what he called voluntary doubt 'for the specific purpose of future certainty';<sup>2</sup> hence his use of the word 'sceptic'. This approach to truth will help to explain the broad sense in which we can designate Coleridge's thought religious and perhaps to suggest what his thought may have had in common with the outstanding patterns of Indian philosophy, literature, and religion, disciplines which have always flourished in closer proximity in the East than in the West. Indeed, to his Western readers Coleridge himself often seems very careless in not separating his religious and philosophical from his literary criticism.

<sup>1</sup> Alice Snyder, *Coleridge on Logic and Learning* (New Haven, 1929), p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> *Biographia Literaria* (London, 1894), p. 126.



I am not suggesting that the Indian shape which his thought took was the result of the conscious or unconscious influence of Indian writers. Coleridge knew very little of the Hindus, and what he had heard was often either distorted or so presented to him as to be distasteful. The following excerpt from *Aids to Reflection* is typical of the kind of information he took in and what he did with it.

'Examine the journals of our zealous missionaries, I will not say among the Hottentots or Esquimaux, but in the highly *civilized*, though fearfully *uncultivated*, inhabitants of ancient India. How often, and how feelingly, do they describe the difficulty of rendering the simplest chain of thought intelligible to the ordinary natives, the rapid exhaustion of their whole power of attention, and with what distressful effort it is exerted while it lasts! Yet it is among these that the hideous practices of self-torture chiefly prevail. O if folly were no *easier* than wisdom, it being often so very much more *grievous*, how certainly might these unhappy slaves of superstition be converted to Christianity! But, alas; to swing by hooks passed through the back, or to walk in shoes with nails of iron pointed upwards through the soles—all this is so much less *difficult*, demands so much less exertion of the will than to *reflect*, and by reflection to gain knowledge and tranquillity!'<sup>1</sup>

German writers of stature whom he knew, for example Schelling and the Schlegels, must have passed on to him certain concepts of Indian thinkers; but what seems far more likely, and, I hope, demonstrable is that Coleridge's mind worked in much the same way as that of important Indian thinkers whom, if he had known them, he would have embraced as brothers. As the only writer who, if we leave Keats's preliminary and unsystematic sketches out of account, can be called the metaphysician of Romanticism, Coleridge was elaborating lines of thought which, had they been extended their full length, would have been far more congruent

<sup>1</sup> *Aids to Reflection*, ed. Thos. Fenby (Edinburgh, 1905), p. 10.

with Hindu thought than they seem in their present abbreviated form. Indeed, the critic often feels unjustified in extending these lines as he thinks they deserve because he may be accused of bending them towards his own preconceived pattern. Many of the critical problems regarding Coleridge's thought, including that of how seriously his growing religious orthodoxy and the resultant intellectual bifurcation should be taken, can perhaps be illuminated by setting the broad sweep of his thought alongside the similar movement of Indian thought and then evaluating the disparate elements in relation to what seem to be the common goals. It is to initiate this new approach to the ever-fascinating mystery of the composition of Coleridge's unwritten *magnum opus* that I should like to point out four features of Indian thought toward which, unwittingly, Coleridge was groping. This critical process somewhat resembles that of superimposing upon a richly patterned fabric separate fragments of another piece of similar pattern, the connection between whose parts has been lost (or as in this case, perhaps never constructed). One could then effect a reasonably accurate projection of the whole from the remaining bits, in spite of the lacunae, and could at once detect any pieces which did not belong to this particular pattern. Such a process is like speculating on the basis of a still-born vertebrate about the features of the animal which would have developed therefrom, using as a basis the fully matured adult.

Let us first of all look at Coleridge's conception of the dynamism of truth-seeking, akin to Keats's 'vale of soul-making', and see to what this corresponds in Indian thought. Reminiscent of the approach of Thomas Browne is Coleridge's exhortation to his literary executors not to regard what he has left behind in notebooks as fixed opinions but rather as 'hints and private thoughts',<sup>1</sup> for he is merely trying all things, on the road to truth. In the same spirit is his defence of his own parentheses because they signalize thoughts that are growing rather than petrified.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R. W. Armour and R. F. Howes, eds., *Coleridge the Talker* (Oxford, 1940), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Charges that he was inconsistent he met with the argument that 'the sum total of all intellectual effort is good sense and method'<sup>1</sup> and that the man who is skilful in exercising these is the genius; he should not be expected to display that foolish consistency which is 'the hob-goblin of little minds'. When issuing a prospectus of his magazine *The Friend*, he announced, in line with this same kind of dynamism, that he hoped to provide not the plan of a palace but a manual of the rules of architecture so that his readers could construct their own intellectual palaces.<sup>2</sup>

There are many statements in Indian philosophy of a similar point of view, from the Shakta worship of divine activity to the more disciplined Jain conception of the dynamic constitution of reality. An evaluation of the philosophy of Dattatreya considers knowledge, as does the Shakta system, to consist not in static conclusions but in a history and a growth 'from the simple to the complex and from the complex to unity'.<sup>3</sup> Advaita Vedanta is said, like the Upanishads, to preach 'the gradual revelation of truth in stages through which spiritual progress takes place'.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, it is understandable that with such insistence upon the on-going character of the spiritual quest, Coleridge should see his ultimate role as that of uniting 'the insulated fragments of truth, and therewith framing [or constructing] a perfect mirror'.<sup>5</sup> He is convinced that none of the insights achieved by men and subsequently abandoned along the road toward truth should ever be rejected in its entirety, and he sketches a syncretic system which is designed to show how a truth is often transformed into error because it is only half a truth mistaken for the whole and requires its proper complement. The inevitably dire consequences

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Complete Works of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York, 1853), II, vii.

<sup>3</sup> Sri Jaya Chamargendra Wadiyar Bahadur, *Dattatreya: The Way and the Goal* (London, Allen & Unwin [1957]), pp. 244-5. The author will be hereinafter referred to as the Maharaja of Mysore.

<sup>4</sup> Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, 5th ed. (Calcutta, 1954), p. 398.

<sup>5</sup> *Specimens of the Table Talk of T. S. Coleridge* (New York, 1884), p. 146.

of this transformation (of a half-truth into an error), which has its roots in the desire for a comfortably petrified and therefore static system, are illustrated when he says:

'He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving his own Sect or Church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all.'<sup>1</sup>

The obverse of this attempt to salvage all the truths men have ever conceived of is to be seen in Coleridge's gentle handling of error. 'Every speculative error,' he says, 'which boasts a multitude of advocates, has its golden as well as its dark side.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed, most errors, he thinks, are probably 'the refraction of some great truth as yet below the horizon . . .'.<sup>3</sup> Again he presents the situation figuratively by saying that 'the same body casts strangely different shadows in different positions and different degrees of light.'<sup>4</sup> Perhaps his most striking figure is contained in these words:

'I regard truth as a divine ventriloquist; I care not from whose mouth the sounds are supposed to proceed, if only the words are audible and intelligible.'<sup>5</sup>

This sentiment is strangely paralleled by that of a Jain writer, Manibhadra, whose statement can serve as a bridge to expressions of the synthetic approach of other Indian systems besides the Jain. Manibhadra says: 'I have no bias *for* Mahavira, and none *against* Kapila and others. *Reasonable words alone are acceptable* to me, whose-ever they might be.'<sup>6</sup> Again, two other figures fruitful in promoting the understanding of this key idea are elaborated by the Maharaja of Mysore in his commentary on Dattatreya:

<sup>1</sup> *Aids to Reflection*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Shedd, *op. cit.*, II, 207.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Statesman's Manual, . . . A Lay Sermon' appended to *Biographia Literaria*, p. 352.

<sup>4</sup> Shedd, *op. cit.*, II, 332.

<sup>5</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Chatterjee and Datta, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

truth likened to a many-faceted gem and to a hill not all of whose parts can be grasped at once except by a 'noetic synthesis'.<sup>1</sup> One remembers here the lines of John Donne, who said that truth stands on a high hill and whoever wins her 'about must and about must go'. Sankara makes the false the co-associate of the true, and the Jains assert that falsity is nothing but a perception of partial truth.<sup>2</sup> The Shakta system goes even further and builds upon diversity of belief a proof of the power of the Supreme. According to a saying attributed to Mahommed, 'difference of opinion is also the gift of God'.<sup>3</sup> The *syadvada* of the Jains, the theory that every judgment is relative, represents the structuring into a philosophical system of this tender concern for whatever human insight has achieved.

Thirdly, in addition to the concept of dynamic truth-seeking and to that of salvaging truth from error, problems of dualism and non-dualism have always played an important part in Indian philosophical speculation. In this field also Coleridge has much to say which is so congruent with as to be indistinguishable from the concept of advaita. In his *Notes on the English Divines* he takes exception to Richard Hooker's statement that "the mixture of those things by speech, which by nature are divided, is the mother of all error". Says Coleridge: "The division in thought of those things which in nature are distinct, yet one, that is distinguished without breach of unity, is the mother [of all error]—so I should have framed the position."<sup>4</sup> What he objects to here is the asserting of 'division as a necessary consequence of distinction'. Only in the moral realm, he feels, must we distinguish in order to separate, that is, in order to separate good from evil since nothing on this earth exists unmixed. 'It is a dull and obtuse mind,' he says in *Aids to Reflection*, 'that must divide in order to distinguish; but it is a still worse, that distinguishes in

<sup>1</sup> Maharaja of Mysore, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Satkari Mookerjee, *The Jaina Philosophy of Non-Absolutism: A Critical Study of Anekantavada* (Calcutta, 1944), p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> Sir John Woodroffe, *Shakti and Shakta: Essays and Addresses on the Shakta Tantrashastra*, 4th ed. (Madras, 1951), p. 367.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. Derwent Coleridge (London, 1853), I, 21.

order to divide. In the former, we may contemplate the source of superstition and idolatry; in the latter, of schism, heresy, and a seditious and sectarian spirit.<sup>1</sup>

On the basic issue of the distinction between body and soul, Coleridge berates Descartes for stressing the 'contrariety of the two as a logical antithesis instead of recognizing it as a philosophical antithesis necessary to the manifestation of the identity of both.'<sup>2</sup> The key word here is 'identity', and Coleridge elsewhere makes clear that being cannot be made manifest without the 'identity of thesis and antithesis'.<sup>3</sup> 'Every power in nature and in spirit', he says, 'must evolve an opposite as the sole means and condition of its manifestation: and all opposition is a tendency to reunion.' The promulgation of this 'universal law of polarity or essential dualism' Coleridge attributes to Heraclitus and its re-discovery to Giordano Bruno.<sup>4</sup> Contrasting the Transcendental philosopher with Descartes, who imitating Archimedes, said, 'Give me matter and motion and I will construct you the universe', Coleridge puts into the mouth of the Transcendental philosopher these words, which on the one hand are reminiscent of the elemental categories of purusha and prakriti and on the other of Edgar Allan Poe's philosophical poem 'Eureka'. Thus the Transcendental philosopher says,

'Grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or find itself in this infinity, and I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representations to rise up before you.'<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere Coleridge refers to these as centrifugal and centipetal forces. 'The Intelligence in the one tends to objectize itself, and

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Lindsay, 'Coleridge Marginalia in a Volume of Descartes', *PMLA* xlix (1934), 188.

<sup>3</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

in the other to know itself in the object.'<sup>1</sup> He comes even closer to a central concern of Indian philosophy, the problem of appearance and reality, when he refers to

'the relations of Cause and Effect, which like the two poles of the magnet manifest the being and unity of the one power by relative opposites, and give, as it were, a substratum of permanence, of identity, and therefore of reality, to the shadowy flux of Time.'<sup>2</sup>

In commenting on Dattatreya, the Maharaja of Mysore attributes much of man's suffering to his attitude of prejudice and partiality. Separatism throws man into 'an exclusivistic and static condition', for which the only remedy is 'the attitude or outlook of identity, of wholeness and of perfection. . . . Duality negates life and unity enriches it.'<sup>3</sup> In condemning the static, the author ties together the dynamism which we first discussed with the *advaita* which grows out of a concern for the relevance of all points of view. Then he goes on to make just the kind of significant distinction which Coleridge would have appreciated and which indeed is implied in much of his writing:

'If *dvaita* were to mean mere breaking without the hope of unifying, mere analysis without synthesis, and if this attitude governs life, then it is a wrong perspective of life. Similarly if *advaita* were to mean mere putting together without proper recognition of opposing elements, then it is mere confusion. Hence *dvaita* must be such that it must transcend itself and make room for *advaita*. *Advaita* must be such that it must be all-inclusive giving at the same time proper recognition to different and opposing elements of life. Thus *dvaita* and *advaita* are not opposed to each other. To bring these two together is therefore an art by itself. The greatness of philosophy consists in the successful expression of this art. When these two are thus brought together and harmonised there is more propriety in calling the resultant product *advaita*, identity rather than *dvaita*, duality.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 239.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.

In explaining the Shakta conception of Maithuna Karma as the uniting of Purusha, Brahman, Shiva with Prakriti, Maya, Shakti, Woodroffe calls up a symbolic representation of identity which would also have appealed to Coleridge, even though it would have poignantly recalled his own unfortunate marriage.<sup>1</sup> The oneness of husband and wife illuminates the problem of dualism with a light similar to that thrown by John Donne's figure of 'that subtle knot which makes us man', which was a poeticizing of Descartes' concept of animal spirits, though very different in its background and impact.

In Coleridge's use of paradox, which is the natural consequence of his concern with dualism, he shows himself to be reaching back across the rationalistic eighteenth century to the seventeenth, in which thinkers of the late Renaissance were aware that in view of the unity cum duality of truth, paradox and contradiction were often the only means of expressing it, short, that is, of action itself, the living of the life. Referring to the seventeenth-century divines whose disciple he was trying to be, Coleridge sets forth a very Indian-like paradox.

'Not to be, then, is impossible; to be, incomprehensible. If thou hast mastered this intuition of absolute existence, thou wilt have learnt likewise, that it was this, and no other, which in the earlier ages seized the nobler minds, the elect among men, with a sort of sacred horror.'<sup>2</sup>

He reassures students in *Aids to Reflection* that in this world, which judges by appearances, many things are paradoxical but nevertheless true, or paradoxical *because* true. The true seer has his thoughts 'fixed on the substance, that which *is* and abides, and which, *because* it is the substance, the outward senses cannot recognize'.<sup>3</sup> The process by which a paradox disturbs the thinker fascinated Coleridge, and on several occasions he tried to account for it.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 600.

<sup>2</sup> Shedd, *op. cit.*, II, 464.

<sup>3</sup> p. 6.



'If the words are taken in the common sense, they convey an absurdity; and if, in contempt of dictionaries and custom, they are so interpreted as to avoid the absurdity, the meaning dwindles into some bald truism. Thus you must at once understand the words contrary to their common import, in order to arrive at any sense; and according to their common import, if you are to receive from them any feeling of sublimity or admiration.'<sup>1</sup>

He worries this puzzling phenomenon in true Indian fashion until at one point he concludes that the paradoxical co-existence of being and becoming, appearance and reality, in the macrocosm, in the world at large, is somehow repeated in the microcosm, showing itself there as

'a mysterious diversity between the injunctions of the mind and the elections of the will; . . . Hence for the finer and more contemplative spirits the ever-strengthening suspicion, that the two Phenomena must some way or other stand in close connexion with each other, and that the Riddle of Fortune and Circumstance is but a form or effluence of the Riddle of Man!'<sup>2</sup>

Pondering this pronouncement might add another dimension to our conception of humanism.

Alongside these paradoxes of Coleridge let us set some of the Indian ones. Beginning with the relatively simple paradox that 'Brahman is understood [only] in so far as it is considered to be above understanding and exposition',<sup>3</sup> we may proceed to the Upanishadic statement, 'To him to whom it is not known to him alone it is known'.<sup>4</sup> Or again, the *Vishvasara Tantra* says, 'What is here, is elsewhere. What is not here, is nowhere'. Woodroffe interprets this to mean that 'the experience of the seen is the experience of the unseen in time and space' and concludes that 'the life of the individual is an expression of the same laws which

<sup>1</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> *Aids to Reflection*, p. 313.

<sup>3</sup> Maharaja of Mysore, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, p. 84.

govern the universe',<sup>1</sup> a conclusion which we have already met in Coleridge.

The Maharaja of Mysore, in commenting on the paradox of the known and the unknown, defines the task of philosophy as primarily that of overcoming this seeming contradiction.<sup>2</sup> In Jain philosophy too we have the belief that 'the contradiction between change and persistence is only apparent'.<sup>3</sup> As a proponent of the Shakta system points out, the man who views the mountain-top from a distance has a very different conception of it than the man who has actually climbed it. Or the same man may have different notions when he is twenty years old from those he has at fifty.<sup>4</sup> These contrasted conceptions may seem to conflict and yet would not really be contradictory. (Here the Jain *syadvada* might prove helpful in settling the logical problem; that is, each conception would be true from its own point of view.)

A striking figure elaborated by Coleridge is appropriate in this connection. He says that the man who paces up and down within the walls of a courtyard prison sees all things as clear and distinct, but this is only because he does not see far. It is the man who is released from his bondage and who travels the open road toward the lofty mountain of truth who is likely to see mirages or to mistake clouds for mountains.<sup>5</sup> That is a part of the risk of his freedom.

One of the chief causes of men's confusion when confronted by paradox and contradiction is, according to Coleridge, that they fail to recognize the distinction between what he calls reason and what he calls understanding. Before we turn to the Indian statements of the problem, let us look at his exposition of this distinction, by elaborating which, following the lead of the Germans, Coleridge made one of his chief contributions to the world's critical thought. He considers the confusion between the terms 'reason' and 'understanding', like that between 'ideas' and 'notions', to be intellectually most mischievous—'a Surinam toad with a swarm of toadlings sprouting out of its back and sides'.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> Mookerjee, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Woodroffe, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Shedd, *op. cit.*, II, 92.

<sup>6</sup> *Notes on the English Divines*, I, 89.

His diagnosis of the ills of eighteenth-century thought centres about the fact that the understanding (which has to do with the logical, practical, and this-worldly) was during that century exalted into the position rightfully belonging to the reason (concerned with the transcendent whole, as it was in Elizabethan times), which had in the meantime sunk into neglect and contempt. Here is his distinction between the two.

'The understanding, therefore, is the science of phenomena, and their subsumption under distinct kinds and sorts (genus and species). Its functions supply the rules and constitute the possibility of experience; but remain mere logical forms, except as far as materials are given by the senses or sensations. The reason, on the other hand, is the science of the universal, having the ideas of oneness and allness as its two elements or primary factors.'<sup>1</sup>

Lamenting the fatal apotheosis of the understanding among religionists, which leaves men merely balancing dualisms logically instead of experiencing their interpenetration and identity, Coleridge waxes rhetorical about the role of reason.

'In religion there is no abstraction. To the unity and infinity of the Divine Nature, of which it is the partaker, it adds the fulness, and to the fulness the grace and the creative overflowing. That which intuitively it at once beholds and adores, praying always, and rejoicing always—that doth it tend to become. In all things and in each thing—for the Almighty goodness does not create generalities or abide in abstractions—in each, the meanest, object it bears witness to a mystery of infinite solution.'<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, 'the experience of the seen is the experience of the unseen in time and space'.<sup>3</sup> At another point in his writings he puts his conclusions into a form which is hard to distinguish from something which one might come across in a book of Indian philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> 'The Statesman's Manual', *op. cit.*, p. 339.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>3</sup> Woodroffe, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

'The ground-work therefore, of all pure speculation is the full apprehension of the difference between the contemplation of reason, namely, that intuition of things which arises when we possess ourselves, as one with the whole, which is substantial knowledge, and that which presents itself when transferring reality to the negations of reality, to the ever-varying framework of the uniform life, we think of ourselves as separated beings, and place nature in antithesis to the mind, as object to subject; thing to thought, death to life. This is abstract knowledge, or the science of mere understanding.'<sup>1</sup>

And here, too, we might add, is the source of dualisms and so the basis for paradox and contradiction, which attempt to heal the breach.

A similar Indian explanation is to be found both in Jainism and in the gospel of Dattatreya, each of which rejects pure logic in favour of the empirical, although strangely enough their English-speaking proponents often use the word 'empirical' in opposite ways. Jain thought prides itself on steering clear of 'the Scylla of monism and the Charybdis of nihilism by accepting the deliveries of experience as the final truth'.<sup>2</sup> Its proponents disapprove, in a tolerant and broad-minded way, of both the Vedantist and the Nihilist on the score that their pure logic is as partial and unrealistic as Coleridge believes the 'understanding' to be. Dattatreya says:

'Where there is nothing to be apprehended by logical intellect, there is nothing to be asserted in rhetorical speech. Immersed in the ecstasy of union and inwardly inspired the Avadhuta proclaims the highest truth.'<sup>3</sup>

'The ecstasy of union' may also be construed as truly empirical in the highest sense; but the Maharaja of Mysore, in commenting on Dattatreya, reserves 'empirical' for the realm of half-truths

<sup>1</sup> Shedd, *op. cit.*, II, 469.

<sup>2</sup> Mookerjee, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> Maharaja of Mysore, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

which Coleridge associates with the understanding. In elaborating upon the above passage the Maharaja puts his finger upon what was for Coleridge the chief fault of eighteenth-century thinking, the confining of operations to the logical intellect and hence the production of merely rhetorical speech. Coleridge recognized in the clear and simple ideas praised in the late seventeenth century by Bishop Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society* a symptom of the coming eighteenth century's oversimplification and hence distortion of basic issues. (We must resist the temptation here to go into the fascinating parallels between Coleridgean and Indian speculation about words and their relation to reality.) The Maharaja of Mysore, who has been contrasting 'knowledge in its essence' with what he calls empirical knowledge, describes the man who bases his speculation upon 'individual experience with all its limitations and relative character' as one whose 'philosophy' remains mere talk, without substance. 'It consists in the end of plain words as the meaning of a word and in this circumstance is bound to have only an empirical significance.'<sup>1</sup> There could scarcely be a better phrase to characterize the two-dimensional thought of the eighteenth century in the West than 'plain words as the meaning of a word'. Behind plain words lay nothing of the knotted and paradoxical character of seventeenth-century thought; they inhabited the realm of the understanding rather than that of the reason.

From this practical example of distinguishing for the purpose of elucidation rather than of division, let us turn for a fourth parallel to Coleridge's emphasis upon unity and to his location of its roots in the moving synthesis which is a man's life. In common with other Transcendentalists, he stresses the intuition, holding the *summum bonum* to be 'the intuitive beholding of truth'. His praise of this operation is one which is in complete accord with what Sanskrit writers mean by *advaitamita*, 'the nectar of identity', or *advaitavasana*, 'the fragrance of non-duality'.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

'This elevation of spirit above the semblances of custom and the senses to a world of spirit, this life in the idea, even in the supreme and godlike, which alone merits the name of life, and without which our organic life is but a state of somnambulism; this it is which affords the sole sure anchorage in the storm, and at the same time the substantiating principle of all true wisdom, the satisfactory solution of all the contradictions of human nature, of the whole riddle of the world.'<sup>1</sup>

Like all mystics, Coleridge finds difficulty in putting into words his experience of reality, and this very difficulty reinforces his conviction that what is true can find expression only in action and that it cannot be transmitted intellectually to another individual. There are reminiscences, too, in the following passage of the figure, familiar to all lovers of Indian poetry, of the air which fills both jar and flute and yet is not contained therein.

'Each individual must bear witness of it [the reason] to his own mind, even as he describes life and light: and with the silence of light it describes itself and swells in *us* only as far as we dwell in it. It cannot in strict language be called a faculty, much less a personal property of any human mind. He, with whom it is present, can as little appropriate it, whether totally or by partition, as he can claim ownership in the breathing air, or make an inclosure in the cope of heaven.'<sup>2</sup>

Thus in the advaitic experience one comes to know that identity-in-difference which is the heart of truth because it is the heart of paradox. Coleridge makes much of the Greek word *parakupsas*, which 'signifies the incurvation or bending of the body in the act of *looking down into*; as, for instance, in the endeavour to see the reflected image of a star at the bottom of a well'.<sup>3</sup> It is this kind of reflection which he finds necessary if a man is to discover the

<sup>1</sup> Shedd, *op. cit.*, II, 471.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Statesman's Manual', *op. cit.*, p. 343.

<sup>3</sup> *Aids to Reflection*, p. 157.

truth. He must recognize its presence in the depths of his own soul as the Atman merges with the Brahman. No external evidence of whatever sort can compare with what has been, as Keats would say, 'proved upon the pulses'. This kind of experience is far different from the circumscribed variety scorned as 'empirical' by the Maharaja of Mysore.

It is significant that just as both Coleridge and Indian thinkers are continually plagued by the problem of nescience (of not knowing) which dualisms imply, so both come in the last analysis to Christ's conviction that if anyone would know, he must first of all be and do. It is not by accident that the God who defined himself as 'I am that I am' should have had a son who replied to his super-subtle critics, 'If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine' (John 7:17).

*'Quantum sumus, scimus.* [In so far as we are, we know.] That which we find within ourselves, which is more than ourselves, and yet the ground of whatever is good and permanent therein is the substance and life of all other knowledge.'<sup>1</sup>

This conviction of the moral and activist basis of all truth justifies at once the dynamic and on-going character of truth-seeking and insures the living continuance of what Coleridge had planned to designate 'Travels in Body and Mind, or the Sceptic's Pilgrimage to the Temple of Truth'.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

## VII

# EMERSON AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF SCEPTICISM



RALPH WALDO EMERSON, like other American Transcendentalists, significantly exemplifies the pattern of thinking designated as creative scepticism. One of the most obvious pieces of evidence in support of this characterization of Emerson is to be found in his essay on 'Montaigne: or the Sceptic' in *Representative Men*. It is wholly sympathetic to the flowing and catalytic quality of Montaigne's scepticism, for in it Emerson, unlike many writers of his day and ours, makes use of the word *sceptic* in its original sense (the Greek *skeptikoi* means 'to consider, enquire, look into, examine, observe, fix one's eyes upon'), uncontaminated by the eighteenth century's restricting and debasement of it into dogmatic incredulity. 'This, then,' he says in the Montaigne essay,

'is the ground of the skeptic—this of consideration, of self-containing; not at all of unbelief; not at all of universal denying, nor of universal doubting—doubting even that he doubts; least of all of scoffing and profligate jeering at all that is stable and good. These are no more his moods than are those of religion and philosophy. He is the considerer, the prudent taking in sail, counting stock, husbanding his means, believing that a man has too many enemies than that he can afford to be his own foe. . . . It is a position taken up for better defence, as of more safety, and one that can be maintained; and it is one of more opportunity and range: as, when we build a house, the rule is to set it not too high nor too low, under the wind, but out of the dirt.'<sup>1</sup>

As the heir of Romanticism, Emerson often contrasted the cold and pedantic style of Pope, Johnson, and Gibbon with the

<sup>1</sup> 'Montaigne: or the Skeptic' in *Representative Men* (Boston, 1930), p. 152.



'blood-warm' periods of Goethe, Wordsworth, and Carlyle or pitted philosophers like Locke, Paley, Mackintosh, and Stewart—'men of the world who are reckoned accomplished talkers'—against those like Spinoza, Kant, and Coleridge—each 'a fervent mystic prophesying half insane under the infinitude of his thought'. There is no doubt that this temperamental reaction against the narrow confines of eighteenth-century rationalism plus his sympathetic reading of the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets and divines provided Emerson with rare insight into and sympathy with the scepticism of Montaigne, which is echoed in much seventeenth-century thought but which the following century repudiated. It was perhaps this predisposition of mind also which enabled him to grasp so unerringly, even in translation, the essence of Vedanta, which can be shown to have much in common with the four phases of creative scepticism—nescience, dualism, paradox, and knowing by doing. His success may be partly measured by the fact that to many Indian intellectuals he seems to fit inconspicuously into the tradition of Hindu thought.

Emerson's peculiar contribution to our understanding of the intricacies of scepticism is that he explores more intimately and describes more effectively than most sceptics the psychological processes through which the sceptic viewpoint may evolve. There are many roads to scepticism, and to have followed the turnings of one of these is excellent preparation for recognizing all the others. Partly by means of his frequently rhapsodic utterance and his consequently oracular form of ratiocination, Emerson takes his readers into the inmost recesses of his thinking and demonstrates the method by which dogmatisms can be eliminated and the mind, forever rescued from the perils of the static, rendered a flexible instrument of truth-seeking.

Emerson exhibits a variation of the classic sceptic emphasis on nescience which is at once related to his fundamental optimism and dramatizes the on-going, eternally revolutionary nature of the sceptic quest. It was common among the Renaissance sceptics continually to remind themselves of the depths of their fundamental ignorance. As John Donne asks, 'Poor soul, in this thy

flesh, what dost thou know?' An awareness of man's nescience seemed therefore to be the first step towards breaking out of unthinking dogmatism and setting forth on the road which would lead through a disturbing awareness of dualisms to paradox and to the conviction that truth can be found and expressed only in action. The sceptic was peculiarly aware that one must never relent in the search for truth if he is to escape a stagnant dogmatism. It is perhaps because of the positive and optimistic Romantic approach of Emerson and his generation in America, as contrasted with the lurking disillusion of the Renaissance, that although he is advocating essentially the same system of truth-seeking as Renaissance sceptics, Emerson demands that a reader look twice before discovering the classic awareness of nescience. It is incidental to Emerson's penetrating analysis of dogmatism. His point of view is that of the man who has already learned that 'Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit. . . . No truth so sublime but it may be trivial tomorrow in the light of new thought.'<sup>1</sup> Whereas the sceptic usually reacts strongly to the shock of discovering his dogmatisms are faulty and immediately despairs of all knowledge, Emerson, when we first encounter his ideas, has already passed through this stage of 'the soul's mumps and measles' to an acceptance of the need for the perennial dislodging of all dogmatisms. From a point far out in the unknown but glorious future he can assure his readers: 'In the thought of tomorrow there is a power to upheave all thy creed, all the creeds, all the literatures of the nations, and marshal thee to a heaven which no epic dream has yet depicted.'<sup>2</sup> His nescience takes the form, then, of not merely admitting the inadequacy of one's dogmatisms but of trusting oneself to a wholly unknown future of which one is confident it holds that for the sake of which all past and future creeds may nonchalantly be repudiated as half-truths. Why, Emerson might ask, should one bemoan the loss of the lesser for the sake of the greater—except that it has become one's own

<sup>1</sup> 'Circles', in *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York, 1940), p. 289.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

and one feels comfortable with it? 'No love can be bound by oath or covenant to secure it against a higher love.'<sup>1</sup> As he put it memorably in the poem 'Give All to Love',

When half-gods go  
The gods arrive.<sup>2</sup>

The intellectual stamina needed to risk one's most cherished beliefs in the hope of achieving broader and deeper insights is what Emerson tries to cultivate as a permanent insurance against having his intellectual flank turned, and it is this guerdon which he holds out as the chief lure of scepticism.

'Valour consists in the power of self-recovery, so that a man cannot have his flank turned, cannot be outgeneralled, but put him where you will, he stands. This can only be by his preferring truth to his past apprehension of truth, and his alert acceptance of it from whatever quarter; the intrepid conviction that his laws, his relations to society, his Christianity, his world, may at any time be superseded and de cease.'<sup>3</sup>

The implication here is that one's past apprehensions of truth, clung to dogmatically instead of being held loosely, constitute the body of one's essential ignorance. Therefore Emerson can advise his hearers to relinquish without regret what they have mistakenly taken for the truth, recognizing that it is the set of the open and continually growing mind which is permanent and indestructible and not the ideas on which the mind is set.

'Let a man learn to look for the permanent in the mutable and fleeting; let him learn to bear the disappearance of things he was wont to reverence without losing his reverence; let him learn that he is here, not to work, but to be worked upon; and that, although abyss open under abyss and opinion displace opinion, all are at last contained in the Eternal Cause:

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 775.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Circles', p. 283.

"If my bark sink, 'tis to another sea".<sup>1</sup>

In his famous 'American Scholar' address, as a prelude to the well-known passage on the use of books, Emerson penetrates to the psychological origins of those outgrown ideas whose relinquishment led certain Renaissance sceptics to bemoan their nescience and even to feel at times that all the universe was given over to mutability. Here he sees that it is the mutability itself upon which a truth-devoted mind must build. By unsubtle minds,

'The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, the act of thought, is transferred to the record. The poet chanting was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit: henceforward it is settled the book is perfect: as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue.'<sup>2</sup>

Because it is easier to grasp and defend a book than to cope with the expanding horizons of 'Man Thinking', men 'set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles.'<sup>3</sup> It is the static quality of the chant, the book, and the statue which Emerson deplores since man's life is 'a progress, and not a station.'<sup>4</sup> In 'a nature whose law is growth',<sup>5</sup> men should, he says, resemble the shell fish who build themselves ever 'more stately mansions' as each successive home becomes too confining for the expanding animal.

'In proportion to the vigor of the individual these revolutions are frequent, until in some happier mind they are incessant and all wordly relations hang very loosely about him, becoming as it were a transparent fluid membrane through which the living form is seen, and not, as in most men, an indurated heterogeneous fabric of many dates and of no settled character, in which the man is imprisoned. Then there can be enlargement, and the man of

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Compensation', p. 186.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Compensation', p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

to-day scarcely recognizes the man of yesterday. And such should be the outward biography of man in time, a putting off of dead circumstances day by day, as he renews his raiment day by day. But to us, in our lapsed estate, resting, not advancing, resisting, not co-operating with the divine expansion, this growth comes by shocks.<sup>1</sup>

It is the shock of such growth which is recorded by most sceptics as the source of their awareness of nescience. (Incidentally, the man referred to here whose 'worldly relations hang very loosely about him' might well be a saint who has achieved *moksa* or is ripe for *nirvana*; the man who is almost unrecognizable from day to day recalls Heraclitus' statement that no man steps into the same stream twice; and the reference to man's renewal is reminiscent of the Chinese emperor, quoted by Thoreau, who had engraved on his bathtub the words, 'Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again'.)<sup>2</sup>

The second phase of creative scepticism is always a sharp awareness of dualisms, though these may be conceived of in many forms. One of the tests of Emerson's Romanticism is that, like Shelley and others among the English Romanticists, he was keenly aware that the spirit of intellectual beauty came and went unaccountably in his life and so set the rhythm of its fundamental polarity. Says Emerson, 'I wish to exchange this flash-of-lightning faith for continuous daylight, this fever-glow for a benign climate.'<sup>3</sup> Under the influence of Coleridge's terminology, Emerson equates the state of mind of rare illumination with reason (or the soul) and that of the intervening darkness with the understanding.

'... one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise. . . .'<sup>4</sup>

The contrast he illustrates by citing the distortion which Jesus' description of himself as the Son of God underwent.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> H. D. Thoreau, 'Walden' in *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. C. Bode (New York, 1947), p. 341.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson, *op. cit.*, 'The Transcendentalist', p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

'He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think." But what a distortion did his doctrine and memory suffer in the same, in the next, and the following ages! There is no doctrine of the Reason which will bear to be taught by the Understanding. The Understanding caught this high chant from the poet's lips, and said, in the next age, "This was Jehovah come down out of heaven. I will kill you, if you say he was a man." The idioms of his language and the figures of his rhetoric have usurped the place of his truth. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

This is what happens when the chant or the book is held in greater reverence than the living man. As Emerson discusses polarity, he is more recognizably at one with all other sceptics who have moved on from a conviction of nescience to an awareness of a world permeated by dualisms.

'Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the inspiration and expiration of plants and animals; in the equation of quantity and quality in the fluids of the animal body; in the systole and diastole of the heart; in the undulations of fluids and of sound; in the centrifugal and centripetal gravity. . . . An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as, spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay.'<sup>2</sup>

These dualisms are of a different order from that cited above, but the two kinds are echoes and reflections of each other within a larger pattern of duality. It is upon the predictability of these dualisms that Emerson bases his optimistic doctrine of compensation. Far back within the intimate chambers of the human psyche

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'An Address', p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Compensation', p. 172.

he probes for the fundamental experiential basis of the polarity of which endless lists of dualisms are merely the objective counterpart. He turns, as Montaigne does in his 'Apology', to his own experience as a writer and in delineating its mutability produces a striking and illuminating figure.

'What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow! I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall.'<sup>1</sup>

Until man can find a way of eliminating the ebb and the weed from his experience, he must perpetually remind himself to expect them. It was the profound sceptic Pascal who warned against the danger of convincing man of his greatness without also reminding him of his smallness and vice versa.

In spite of Emerson's continual awareness of the polarity of all experience, he is never torn apart by such sensitivity, for he has made some progress toward reconciling opposites. At least he has caught sight of several general principles by whose application he may arrange certain sets of opposites in meaningful patterns. If we consider Aristotle and Plato as the heads of divergent philosophical schools, we may yet, upon deeper study, come to the conclusion that, as Emerson says,

'Aristotle platonizes. By going one step farther back in thought, discordant opinions are reconciled by being seen to be two extremes of one principle, and we can never go so far back as to preclude a still higher vision.'<sup>2</sup>

Thus by a kind of infinite regress, which reaches progressively greater and greater heights, opposites fall into the same class just as Aristotle and Plato may be brought together and seen as aspects

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Circles', p. 282.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

of the One. But more characteristic of Emerson and much more widely used by him is the principle which designates nature as 'the apparition of God',<sup>1</sup> whereas God and nature might well have been considered antipathetic forces. According to Emerson, nature has the power to educate both the understanding and the reason and thereby in some sense to embrace these two.

'Every property of matter is a school for the understanding—its solidity or resistance, its inertia, its extension, its figure, its divisibility. The understanding adds, divides, combines, measures, and finds nutriment and room for its activity in this worthy scene. Meantime, Reason transfers all these lessons into its own world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marries Matter and Mind.'<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the history of scepticism, the basic dualism has always been that of mind and matter, which Emerson here marries by means of an analogy, a procedure which is akin to the techniques of symbolic logic. He is convinced that the true significance of every natural phenomenon is that it bodles forth a spiritual truth. This leaves an infinite scope for reading the lessons of nature. The imagination thus plays an exalted spiritual role, for 'The Imagination may be defined to be the use which the Reason makes of the material world'.<sup>3</sup> Living and working in the presence of nature, Emerson considers, along with other Romanticists, to be a powerful and beneficent moulder the individual's ethical life.

'The moral influence of nature upon every individual is that amount of truth which it illustrates to him. Who can estimate this? Who can guess how much firmness the sea-beaten rock has taught the fisherman? How much tranquillity has been reflected to man from the azure sky, over whose unspotted deeps the winds forevermore drive flocks of stormy clouds, and leave no wrinkle or stain? How much industry and providence and affection we

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Nature', p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.



have caught from the pantomime of brutes? What a searching preacher of self-command is the varying phenomenon of Health!<sup>1</sup>

Thus nature, which might by some people be considered as the foe of the moral life, is made its ally, and the sting has been removed from another dualism.

The interweaving and uniting of opposites may proceed with an apparent smoothness, as does Emerson's, but on the obverse side, where the knots show, paradox, the trademark of the sceptic, is everywhere to be seen. Emerson utters the watchword of all serious framers of paradoxes when he says, 'People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the value of the paradox is largely a matter of shock therapy. Sometimes Emerson confines his paradoxes to the usual type, as when he contrasts the overcautious, the man who would save his life, with the man who does not dwell on the evil which may befall him, the man who might lose his life with eyes fixed on a higher value. Of these two he says, 'the highest prudence is the lowest prudence',<sup>3</sup> just as Jesus says, 'He that saveth his life shall lose it.' More often Emerson sets his paradoxes, like his nescience, against a background of action, as when he says,

'It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.'<sup>4</sup>

The paradox here is embodied in the life of a man who is not torn between following the crowd and maintaining his own integrity but who has learned, paradoxically, to combine the two. He obliquely cuts across them and so salvages the values of both. The most famous of Emerson's pronouncements of a paradoxical nature is to be found in his treatment of the problem of contradiction.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Circles', p. 289.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Self-Reliance', p. 150.

'But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? . . . bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day. In your metaphysics you have denied personality to the Deity, yet when the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and life, though they should clothe God with shape and color. Leave your theory, as Joseph his coat in the hands of the harlot, and flee.

'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. . . . Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today.'<sup>1</sup>

This calmness before the possibility of contradiction is very much like Whitman's

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself.  
(I am large. I contain multitudes.)

Such nonchalance toward contradiction can from one side be seen as a conviction that the clash of opposites may act as the rubbing of a lamp to call truth into being, and from another side it can argue an unshakable faith that contradiction signifies the stepping forward of the soul toward new realms of comprehension. Emerson makes good use, in this connection, of a nautical figure.

'The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

This is in keeping with his reconciliation of Aristotle and Plato when viewed from a point beyond both of them.

It is scarcely necessary to reiterate, after this demonstration of the first three phases of his scepticism, that Emerson is one who believes that man must do in order to know, that out of ever deepening and widening experience comes the only truth man is ever to embrace with confidence—and even this he must be forever willing to relinquish when it shows signs of impeding his growth. Emerson centres about words and their use many of his pronouncements on action as a means of knowing and expressing the truth. He recognizes the inadequacy of words, even when they are pushed far into paradox and contradiction.

'Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it. An action is the perfection and publication of thought. A right action seems to fill the eye, and to be related to all nature.'<sup>1</sup>

It will appear a commonplace to Indian thinkers that words, which have been devised to describe the world of *maya*, will break down when confronted with the world of ultimate reality, which *maya* only veils. Emerson advises the American scholar to draw upon the resources not only of nature and the mind of the past but also of action and warns that a failure to utilize this third storehouse will be perceptible in the very words he employs. 'Only so much do I know as I have lived.'<sup>2</sup> 'If it were only for a vocabulary, the scholar would be covetous of action. . . . I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech.'<sup>3</sup> 'Does he lack organ or medium to impart his truths? He can still fall back on this elemental force of living them. This is a total act. Thinking is a partial act. . . . Time shall teach him that the scholar loses no hour which the man lives.'<sup>4</sup>

As we have seen continually in Emerson, he is able to transcribe

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Nature', p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The American Scholar', p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

his deepest experiences with an immediacy which often startles the reader by seeming to reach into his hitherto inarticulate experience. This is strikingly true in a passage from the essay 'Circles'.

'I can know that truth is divine and helpful; but how it shall help me I can have no guess, for *so to be* is the sole inlet of *so to know*. The new position of the advancing man has all the powers of the old, yet has them all new. It carries in its bosom all the energies of the past, yet is itself an exhalation of the morning. I cast away in this new moment all my once hoarded knowledge, as vacant and vain. Now for the first time seem I to know any thing rightly. The simplest words—we do not know what they mean except when we love and aspire.'<sup>1</sup>

Whoever has come into an awareness of moving from inadequate and second-hand wisdom to the kind he has won through his own bitter and often despairing experience will appreciate this sketch of Emerson's for a new approach to semantics. It is this illuminative action alone which teaches, and for its sake the sceptic must be willing to go through the preparatory discipline of nescience, the struggle with dualisms, and the intellectual wrenchings of paradox. He will then be able, with the unconventional angel Uriel, to face the scorn of those who would resist growth and to keep repeating:

'Line in nature is not found.  
Unit and universe are round;  
In vain produced, all rays return;  
Evil will bless and ice will burn'.<sup>2</sup>

But eventually the indisputable evidence of nature itself reinforces the cause of truth, and the opposition begins to crack without Uriel's ever having committed the unpardonable sin of taking up the dogmatist's cudgels.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Uriel', p. 764.

And shrilling from the solar course,  
 Or from fruit of chemic force,  
 Procession of a soul in matter,  
 Or the speeding change of water,  
 Out of the good of evil born,  
 Came Uriel's voice of cherub scorn,  
 And a blush tinged the upper sky,  
 And the gods shook, they knew not why.<sup>1</sup>

The experience of man with nature and with other men can therefore be counted upon to bolster the truth which is as inclusive as the individual can compass and whose circles have been drawn correspondingly large, for in contrast to the dogmatist's linear conclusions, the only kind acceptable to the sceptic is circular. Thus Emerson's words, in true sceptic fashion, are not meant to delimit but to liberate the reader and to set him adrift with a few general principles upon the quest for a certainty which can never enslave him because he must continually be working at its re-fashioning and clarification and, most important of all, testing it in his own living.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 765.

## VII

# MELVILLE AND CIRCULARITY

WHEN one discusses Herman Melville, even if one confines himself to the chief masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*, there are many critical problems of a conventional nature which present themselves insistently. Books have been written, for example, on the meaning of the white whale as the chief symbol of the novel. Does it signify God, evil, nature, or some other indomitable force? However, one can probably accept Ahab's own evaluation, as explained by the narrator Ishmael, identified quite confidently by most critics as the voice of Melville himself, in Chapter XLI, 'Moby Dick':

'... all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*' (173).<sup>1</sup>

That the whale has become for Ahab 'the monomaniacal incarnation of all those malicious agencies . . .' seems borne out by the subsequent episodes of the novel. To recognize therefore that to Ahab the whale means every kind of evil would obviate the seemingly fruitless conjectures on this point since it is with this signification that every commentator on *Moby-Dick* must cope in the end.

Another and more intellectually profitable critical problem involves the relation of Melville to American Transcendentalism as represented by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, a movement

<sup>1</sup> Hermann Melville, *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, ed. Willard Thorp (New York, 1947). All subsequent page references in parentheses are to this edition of the novel.

which owed much to the catalyzing influence of the Oriental scriptures. As has been repeatedly pointed out, Melville shares many of the chief tenets of Transcendentalism, but along with his neighbour Hawthorne, he was responsible for some of the most radical and devastating criticism which has ever been levelled against it, particularly with respect to the problem of evil, which Emerson and Co. often seem to have minimized.

It is, however, neither the fundamental symbolism of the whale nor Melville's connection with Transcendentalism which will chiefly occupy us here. We may perhaps incidentally come to some conclusions about both the symbolism of *Moby Dick* and the Transcendentalism of Melville if we concentrate on relating his chief work to the tradition of creative scepticism.

We have already noted in connection with Emerson the far-reaching appropriateness to sceptical thought of the symbol of the circle. For him the presence of this figure both in nature and in the subtler realm of man's mind is merely one more evidence supporting his Romantic conviction that the chief metaphysical use of nature is as a symbolic signpost revealing the truth about human experience. Melville, with the perhaps greater intensity and concentration of his probing, philosophical mind, gathered up within the concept of circularity not only his diagnosis of the monomania of Ahab but, by implication, his prescription for the good life. What Melville seems to have done is to have learned from the Transcendentalists (and from the Oriental literature which he too read) a technique of insight which he then used to criticize the Transcendentalist position with respect to the problem of evil, a problem which he took much more to heart than did the Transcendentalists. It will be shown in the course of this criticism that his thought was congruent in many important areas with the pattern which we have labelled creative scepticism.

Captain Ahab, in one of his rare moments of insight, set as usual by Melville at the end of a chapter, gives powerful expression to the idea that there is a remarkable parallelism between the easily discernible patterns of the macrocosm and those more deeply hidden ones which constitute the mind of microcosmic man.

'O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind' (294).

If there is a single clue to the meaning of *Moby-Dick*, may it not lie in Melville's consistent effort to match every atom of his objective story with its 'cunning duplicate in mind'?

Let us look at three of these outstanding analogies for whatever pattern they can yield: Ishmael's experience with his shipmates in squeezing the whale's sperm to break up its globules, Melville's comments (through Ishmael) on the security of islands versus the freedom of the unbounded sea, and finally his use of the world's roundness and of circumnavigation as a supreme symbol of truth.

In the chapter called 'A Squeeze of the Hand' Ishmael rhapsodizes concerning the feeling of oneness with which he and his fellows squeezed through their fingers the sweet-smelling whale sperm and drew closer to each other in human fellowship as they worked.

'Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness' (391).

The advaitic tone of this expansive sentiment is unmistakable, but at once its boundlessness is balanced by the astringency of the following very Confucian remark:

'Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case [the cavity in the whale's head which contains spermaceti] eternally' (391).



This is but one of many pieces of evidence to support the theory that Melville is a truly creative sceptic, for he is a master of the art of *isosothenia*, whether in large or in small affairs; he almost never posits a general truth without also positing its opposite; and what could lead on more inevitably to paradox and circularity?

It is not only when he is squeezing sperm or when he is tied to the cannibal harpooner Queequeg by a monkey rope that Ishmael feels the interdependence and mystic oneness of all men. Indeed, he has achieved this state through a series of enlightening experiences at the Spouter Inn in which he has come to learn that he has more in common with the Pagan harpooner than with many a Christian. 'Heaven have mercy on us all—Presbyterians and Pagans alike—for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending' (78). Queequeg himself comes to the conclusion that 'We cannibals must help these Christians' (59), and Ishmael reciprocates, after sharing Ramadan with Queequeg, by presenting him to the Christian owners of the ship as a member of 'the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world' (84). As Melville implies no stratification of men according to their religion, so he is convinced of the essential dignity of man which transcends the economic or social position in which he finds himself, 'that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!' (108). This strikes an unmistakably Transcendental note, which might have contributed to Whitman's paean to democracy. The fact that the ship's crew consists of men of all countries, races, and religions gives from the very beginning international overtones to all remarks concerning brotherhood and human solidarity. It is, as Melville says, a 'joint-stock world'. In one of the rare moments of awareness which might have saved him, Ahab senses a mysterious link with Pip himself, the witless Negro cabin boy; and in a scene reminiscent of those between Lear and his Fool, Ahab says, 'Oh,

sir, let old Perth [the blacksmith] now come and rivet these two hands together; the black one with the white, for I will not let this go' (484). Pip may be idiotic, but he is 'full of the sweet things of love and gratitude', in which we shall see Ahab was so tragically lacking.

Yet no matter how mystical Melville can wax about the advaitic experience in which all men merge into an indistinguishable wholeness, his *isosothenia* continually reminds him that there is another side to the medal. In the chapter entitled 'The Mast-Head' he warns against sending a dreamy-eyed young Platonist up the mast to look for whales because with the blending 'cadence of waves with thoughts' he may take 'the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature' (149). In a moment of absent-minded contemplation of the whole he may slip and 'drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise forever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!' (149). Pyrrho himself could not achieve a nicer balance than Melville does here—with on the one hand his conviction that every atom of matter is mirrored in mind and, on the other, his warning that to penetrate too deeply into these analogies is to be lost—or at least to the practical business of sighting and running down whales.

In what Melville has to say of islands he again gives striking evidence of the technique of *isosothenia*. Near the beginning of the book he introduces a character, Bulkington, who returns from one whaling voyage and immediately signs up for another. This action gives rise to the author's speculation on the confining quality of land and the endless freedom of the ocean—an echo of the sentiment which sent Ishmael out to sea when he felt that life on the island of Manhattan had grown 'stale, flat, and unprofitable'.

'Know ye now, Bulkington? Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep open the independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous shore?'

'But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—, so better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!' (100).

But within another hundred and fifty pages Melville has worked himself, through his spokesman Ishmael, toward the other side of the mountain of truth; and as if he were a devout Jain practising *syadvada*, he advises:

'... consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!' (261).

There is no guarantee, in the shifting panorama of life, that a design in the external world signifies one and only one meaning in the world of mind. How can the truth be encompassed, Melville seems to be saying, except by means of paradox? Keep yourself free of the stultifying security of the land, but never push off from the one 'insular Tahiti' within, at the peril of losing yourself in the unfathomed deeps, full of horror because uncharted. Melville muses over the fact that not only are the *Pequod's* crewmen representative of all races, nations, and religions, but all of them come originally from islands—*Isolatoës* he calls them, as if each lived on 'a separate continent of his own', as the solipsists hold. For the moment he chooses to disregard 'the common continent of men' (evidence again of the kaleidoscopic shifting of meanings), but he sees the *Isolatoës* 'federated along one keel' (112), perhaps the same keel to which Whitman refers when he says, 'A kelson of creation is love'.

Among Melville's other paradoxes is one which echoes Hamlet's soliloquy on man:

'Seat thyself sultanically among the moons of Saturn, and take high abstracted man alone; and he seems a wonder, a grandeur, and a woe. But from the same point, take mankind in mass, and for the most part they seem a mob of unnecessary duplicates, both contemporary and hereditary' (436).

It was Pascal, an outstanding creative sceptic, who insisted that one must never remind man of his greatness without also reminding him of his smallness. In yet another context, when delineating what Pip saw when he barely escaped drowning, Melville writes:

'He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God' (390).

Here is the nescience of creative scepticism and its progression through dualism and paradox toward the high goal of wisdom won by means of action, a wisdom which in its steady transcendence partakes of the 'indifference' or indefinable beyondness of God. 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.' Melville strikes out, near the opening of his novel, one of the most valid figures to describe nescience, based, as all appropriate figures are, on the correspondence of matter and mind. Crustaceans may look up from their beds at the sun through the refracting medium of 'thick water' and match the distortion of perfect Ideas experienced by Plato's men in the cave. Meditating on the chances of sudden death which face every whaling man, Ishmael concludes:

'Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and

thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being' (36).

This Platonism and Vedantism constitute, as we have seen in the case of the meditator of the mast-head, only half the picture, but Melville never fails to present the complementary half, and this dualism constitutes the warp and woof of his scepticism.

We are now prepared to grasp the inwardness of Melville's supreme figure of circularity—that of the round globe itself. In this respect he recapitulates the discovery of a seventeenth-century sceptic, John Donne, that to move from the conception of a flat earth to that of a round one is to open up new and unsuspected spiritual depths. Although Donne's pain-wracked body lying on the bed resembles a flat map, where east and west are opposites, he knows that such maps distort reality, which is more accurately represented by a globe, where sunset and sunrise are indistinguishable and where 'death doth touch the resurrection'. In the chapter called 'The Albatross' Ahab inadvertently gives the order to the helmsman, 'Up helm! Keep her off round the world!' To Ishmael these words are full of metaphysical significance.

'Round the world! There is much in that sound to inspire proud feelings; but whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct? Only through the numberless perils to the very point whence we started, where those that we left behind secure, were all the time before us.

'Were this world an endless plain, and by sailing eastward we could forever reach new distances, and discover sights more sweet and strange than any Cyclades or Islands of King Solomon, then there were promise in the voyage. But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed' (223-4).

Melville here presents both the optimistic and the pessimistic implications of circularity—circumnavigation returns us to the

security of our starting point or it 'leads us on in barren mazes'. In the contrast which Melville presents throughout the book between the misdirected human life, as exemplified in Ahab, and by implication the fruitful and creative life which knows how to handle a world composed of both good and evil, he makes much of the fact that the first one operates in terms of planes and straight lines ('The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails . . .' 158) and the second in terms of the circularity which Emerson lauded in his essay 'Circles' and which Eliot celebrated in 'The Four Quartets':

In my end is my beginning. . . .  
We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

Rhapsodizing in the chapter entitled 'The Glider', Ishmael concludes that the rare calms of life, foregleams of absolute reality, cannot, by the nature of man's existence, endure without interruption—again a conclusion in favour of circularity as a more realistic pattern of human existence than linear progression.

'Would to God these blessed calms would last. But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm. There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:—through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs

<sup>1</sup> The most striking setting I have ever seen for these lines, and the most unexpected, is the wall of the Marine Biological Station of Annamalai University at Porto Novo, India, where they seem peculiarly appropriate to the kind of scientific investigation which is being conducted there.

eternally. Where lies the final harbour, when we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary?' (459)

The same theme of circularity finds a minor development in Stubb's soliloquy on the zodiac in 'The Doubloon', where he follows the sun, as a symbol of man's life, through each of the twelve houses and concludes:

'There's a sermon now, writ in high heaven, and the sun goes through it every year, and yet comes out of it all alive and hearty.' (406).

Hints of these recurrent and inconclusive cycles had been given early in the novel where Ishmael was meditating on the significance of Father Mapple's pulpit. 'Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow' (38). Probably if Melville had not taken so seriously this concept of the circularity and hence of the incompleteness and ongoing nature of human life, his critics would have found it much easier to pin him down to a few banal conclusions which would have constituted his wisdom. Each critic must, lacking this opportunity, repeat to himself daily, as a kind of litany, the sobering words of Melville:

'... small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!' (135).

One important corollary of this circularity and incompleteness is a corollary not completely understood by the Transcendentalists: that joy and sorrow, good and evil are both necessary to the texture of human experience. As Ishmael puts it, 'the gods them-

selves are not for ever glad. The ineffaceable, sad birth-mark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow in the signers' (435). In view of postulates such as these, Ahab's unilateral and monomaniacal pursuit of Moby Dick as total evil takes on a new dimension of absurdity since the gods themselves somehow partake of mingled good and evil. This insight is sealed with the image of the whale sailing through tropical seas, the canopy of vapour over his head (product of his contemplations) irradiated by a rainbow.

'For, d'ye see, rainbows do not visit the clear air; they only irradiate vapour. And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye' (351).

We come here again upon the paradoxical but creative indifference which elsewhere Melville associates with God, who is far above the categories of either believer or infidel. Doubt and sorrow are accepted as integral parts of the whole; but Melville is careful to draw the distinction between two kinds of woe, one the result of deep wisdom born out of the inconsistencies and ambiguities of life and the other leading to mania such as Ahab's. The difference seems to reside in whether one thinks in terms of circles or of straight lines and planes. What Melville calls for is a kind of spherical geometry of the soul.



lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar' (399).

Whether one is born with the Catskill eagle in one's soul or whether one can somehow acquire it, Melville does not tell us. Perhaps he was here describing what William James was later to call 'the healthy-minded' in contrast to the 'sick soul', as exemplified by Ahab.

And now what light can be thrown upon the interpretation of Ahab's character by what we know of Melville's creative scepticism as it shows itself in his use of figures setting forth paradox and circularity? Of the four phases of scepticism—nescience, dualism, paradox, knowing by doing—Ahab represents almost the complete antithesis. In opposition to the careful nescience of the sceptic he vaunts the dogmatism of a man who will brook no opposition and will accept no advice. 'I'd strike the sun if he insulted me' (154). '... come and see if ye can swerve me. . . . The path to my purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. . . . Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way' (158). One feels that the first crack in Ahab's monomania would be the serious recognition that he might be wrong in pursuing the white whale across the seven seas, even if it were an adequate symbol or agent of evil. He comes tantalizingly close to such a recognition on several occasions; but the rigidity of his purpose, reinforced by his culture's approval of the unwavering man of principle, makes it impossible for him to take advice from his crew or to admit he may be wrong.

Dualisms he recognizes ceaselessly; in fact his whole world culminates in the sovereign dualism of good and evil. It is not accidental that he seems to be a blood brother of the Parsi, Fedallah, whose tradition centres about the eternal struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness. As he follows the lead of the Zoroastrian harpooner, the dualism of his world, like the iron rails and the voyage along a flat plane, is a rigid dualism; and his solution is to eliminate evil so that good can triumph—confident that he knows what is good and what is

evil. His dualism is never of the kind which turns back on itself and makes one wonder whether the lines are as clear-cut as they once seemed, the kind which might eventuate in creative paradox.

The net result of this rigidity is that Captain Ahab becomes one of the loneliest characters in fiction, an elaborately embroidered proliferation of Shakespeare's Richard III, who could declare, 'I am myself alone' and thereby diagnose his malady. As Ahab says of himself, amidst the chase of *Moby Dick*, "Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbours!" (512). Yet he must admit to Starbuck that "'tis sweet to lean sometimes, be the leaner who he will; and would old Ahab had leaned oftener than he has" (518). But determined to be 'forever Ahab', he plunges on along his fanatical, dogmatic groove and finally pronounces his own epitaph, "Oh, lonely death on lonely life!" (530). If one were to list the occasions throughout the novel on which Ahab rejected an opportunity to counterbalance his dogmatism and to admit both his nescience and the paradoxical nature of human experience, one would discover that Melville usually centres his criticism of Ahab about the word 'human'. This seems to represent for him the plastic endlessness of the circle, as when Starbuck, aware of the horrors for which he is heading with Ahab, appeals to 'the soft feeling of the human . . .' (159), a quality which we have seen growing and developing in Ishmael too, who, far from pitting himself blindly against the evil of the universe, is at last, paradoxically, saved as he clings to a coffin. Although Ahab drops overboard, one by one, his pipe, hat, quadrant, and other symbols of the rounded human, he is not wholly immune, near the end, to the warm and loving atmosphere of what Melville personifies as 'the feminine air' (500). The wisdom which Ahab might have learned and which might have saved him is the wisdom which takes in and preserves both halves of every dualism and which weaves all together into a rich fabric. Again and again Melville shows people living creatively in spite of apparently overwhelming odds: Perth, the ship's blacksmith, learning to live after the collapse of his fortunes and the pitiful death of his family; people

making hay even on the whale-hump slopes of the white Andes; islanders transforming the beached skeleton of the whale itself into a chapel entwined by the rich jungle life with green creepers which subdue the fearsomeness of the mighty carcass.

If Melville has any advice to give the beleagured Ahab's of the world who will not yield, it is perhaps to cultivate in the midst of life's inescapable evils a quality of non-attachment for which he uses the whale itself as a symbol. (Perhaps Ahab had merely misread the hieroglyphic of the whale!)

'It does seem to me, that herein we see the rare virtue of a strong individual vitality, and the rare virtue of thick walls, and the rare virtue of interior spaciousness. Oh, man! admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it. Be cool at the equator; keep thy blood fluid at the Pole. Like the great dome of St. Peter's, and like the great white whale, retain, O man! in all seasons a temperature of thine own' (290).

But as in the case of the Catskill eagle in the soul, Melville is not sanguine that many men are built with the vastness of the Roman cathedral or of the whale. Taking again as his model the whales in the centre of a large herd extending over two or three square miles, Ishmael marvels at the sporting and lovemaking which go on quite untouched by the presence of whaling ships on the outer edges of this 'grand armada'.

'And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concerns yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy' (365).

This is *ataraxia*, the goal of the sceptic pilgrimage, the truth at which one arrives through action.

Thus *Moby-Dick* might, from one point of view, be seen as a great novel of creative scepticism since it delineates with a strangely compelling power the tragedy of a man who never once conceives that he may be wrong or that the world is other than he pictures it. Ahab is the supreme dogmatist who operates in a two-dimensional world of straight lines and stiff, paper-thin planes while the great and burgeoning globe on which he sails shouts its endless circularity, plasticity, and potential bliss in his deafened ear.

## XI

### HENRY JAMES, INCOMPLETE SCEPTIC



LIKE many aspects of life in modern Western civilization, the writings of Henry James have posed a problem. So have the writings of Herman Melville, as a quick glance at the critical literature will reveal, but whereas in the case of Melville the problem centres about the meaning of his symbols (and particularly that of the white whale), in James' it involves the fundamental question of whether, indeed, his stories have a deep and coherent meaning or whether his chief concern was with the intricacies of an increasingly elaborated style, which never quite satisfied him as the vehicle for his vision of life. Instead of merely being concerned with style for its own sake, however, he seems to have been aiming at a higher realism than his European and American colleagues and trying to devise a language which should transmit this realistic vision to his audience with the least possible loss. Behind this struggle lay the assumption that if men's actions were once seen in their proper perspective, the 'figure in the carpet' would necessarily spring into focus, and meaning would have been achieved. It is not surprising, perhaps, that much of Henry James criticism centres about stylistic matters since in his own prefaces and critical writings he puts so much emphasis upon style, but it must be noted that he expands the meaning of this word until it covers much more than the mere setting of phrases together to create an effect of beauty and significance. As a member of a philosophical family whose ties with Transcendentalism were intimate, he might be supposed to have carried something of that movement's creative scepticism into his writing. However, the whole effect of his work—penetrating and insightful as it is—is not quite the same as that of the variety of men we have designated as creative sceptics—Montaigne, Pascal, Donne, Browne,

and in America Emerson and Melville. The question under consideration here, therefore, will be to what extent the writings of Henry James, with their prime emphasis upon the achievement of a distinctive style, exhibit the pattern of creative scepticism and what is the significance of the lacunae which break the pattern and render him, rather, an incomplete sceptic. We do not mean to imply here a qualitative standard by the application of which those who do not measure up to the pattern are set down as inferior writers. They are simply different from those who do, and to investigate one of these incomplete sceptics may perhaps serve further to clarify what is meant by creative scepticism and to delimit more sharply the characteristic qualities of its practitioners, who constitute a discernible and significant tradition reaching from Pyrrho down through the Romans, across the Middle Ages, and emerging in varied forms throughout the Renaissance to our own day.

A discerning critic of Henry James<sup>1</sup> has recently made explicit what has long been glimpsed fitfully, that the philosophical system upon which James based his novels and short stories was that of his father, Henry James, Sr, the friend of Emerson (though critical of Transcendentalism) and expositor of the religion and philosophy of Emmanuel Swedenborg. A glance at the father's system, therefore, particularly in relation to the sceptic pattern, will prepare us for a consideration of the incomplete scepticism of Henry James, Jr—for an appreciation of its genuinely sceptical elements and of the importance of what was omitted.

Both father and son may be considered as carrying on the great Renaissance humanist tradition of a transvaluation of values, the rethinking of what is good and true and beautiful in terms of man and his highest potentialities. F. O. Matthiessen says of Henry James, Sr, that he

'recaptured the ancient doctrine of the microcosm and the macrocosm, the doctrine of the harmonious correspondence between the inner and the outer worlds. Through the majesty

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Anderson, *The American Henry James* (Rutgers, 1957; London).

of such a conception, James, like the great poets and thinkers of the sixteenth-century renaissance, reaffirmed the potentially heroic stature of man'.<sup>1</sup>

It can be shown, however, that an important ingredient in sixteenth century humanism was its scepticism, and this, on Henry James, Sr's own admission, was lacking in his experience.

'A sceptical state', he once declared, 'I have never known for a moment'.<sup>2</sup>

Even allowing for varying interpretations of the word 'sceptical', this statement is perhaps an important clue to the mental set of both father and son. Matthiessen is moved to contrast James' exuberant faith in man with the troubled doubts of Melville, whose scepticism he rightly associates with that of Hamlet, without apparently recognizing what an important clue he has turned up here. For in the father's admitted lack of sceptical experience may be the seeds of both his and his son's quarrel with Transcendentalism.

The explicit incident in the life of Henry James, Sr, which revolutionized his mental outlook and which set the pattern for his subsequent view of man and his world was in the nature of a mystic experience. Between the time he sat down at a certain dinner table in Windsor, England, and the time he arose, he had been transformed from a believer in selfhood and individual righteousness into a man convinced that the self must gradually wither away and that 'Universal Man is God's one creature: only in Man and through Man would he [James] be saved'.<sup>3</sup> This colossal humanism, which James found reinforced in the pages of Swedenborg, he delineates thus:

'My being lies utterly outside of *myself*, lies in utterly forgetting *myself*, lies in utterly unlearning and disusing all its elaborately

<sup>1</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family* (New York, 1947), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167. 'W Js' Introduction to Henry, Senior's, *Literary Remains*.

petty schemes and dodges now grown so transparent that a child is not deceived by them; lies, in fact, *in honestly identifying myself with others*. I know it will never be possible for me to do this perfectly,—that is, attain to self-extinction, . . . because being created, I can never hope actually to become Divine; but at all events I shall become, through eternal years more and more intimately one in nature, and I hope in spirit, with a being who is thoroughly destitute of this finiting principle,—that is, a being who is without selfhood save in His creatures.<sup>1</sup>

The title of his *Society the Redeemed Form of Man* became henceforth a kind of shorthand notation to mark the spot where his mystic transformation had occurred, the great divide between his earlier and his later scholarly endeavours. Noble and uplifting and inspiring as this experience was, in its uniqueness lies its significance for our study of creative scepticism. From Emerson's writings we get the impression (and behind this lies his theory of contradictions) that such moments of insight came often to him too, but that he gradually became accustomed to the possibility that one such experience might completely overturn the conclusions which he had drawn from its immediate predecessor. For Henry James, Sr, however, this was the definitive experience, and he lived the rest of his life by the light of its illumination. Indeed, if Quentin Anderson is right, his novelist son wrote all his fictional works in the mellow rays of its afterglow. This would be enough to account for the absence in either man of a persistent and contradictory circularity akin to the scepticism of both Melville and Emerson.

But let us look, nevertheless, at the elements of creative scepticism which are indeed present in the work of, first, Henry James, Sr, and second, Henry James, Jr, as a means of relating them to the Transcendentalism in whose lengthening shadow they lived and wrote. With these elements in their makeup, how is it that neither man qualifies as a creative sceptic? Is it perhaps the proportion or the combination of elements (like the pattern of molecules in an

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.



atom) which is the decisive factor? And is the controversy concerning style or meaning in the younger Henry James related to his and his father's distrust of the scepticism we call creative?

Considering nescience as the first element in creative scepticism, we have two bits of evidence from the elder James which should, if taken seriously, have insured a continually moving and expanding sceptical experience. In Henry, Sr's account of his disgust at the trivialities of his companions at an English water-cure, where his doctor had sent him to recover from the first melancholy phase which followed upon the dinner table experience, he diagnoses human ills in a thoroughly sceptical fashion:

*'The curse of mankind, that which keeps our manhood so little and so depraved, is its sense of selfhood, and the absurd, abominable opinionativeness it engenders. How sweet it would be to find oneself no longer man, but one of those innocent and ignorant sheep pasturing upon that placid hillside, and drinking in eternal dew and freshness from Nature's lavish bosom!'*<sup>1</sup>

Here is the authentic anti-intellectualism of the Romantic movement, the giving up moral questions in despair. In the months which followed, James had an opportunity to apply this generalization to his own condition, having rejected 'the immense piles of manuscript' which he had accumulated by his private scholarship and which illustrated his 'abominable opinionativeness.'

'I suppose if any one had designated me previous to that event as an earnest seeker after truth, I should myself have seen nothing unbecoming in the appellation. But now, within two or three months of my catastrophe, I felt sure I had never caught a glimpse of truth. My present consciousness was exactly that of an utter and plenary destitution of truth. Indeed, an ugly suspicion had more than once forced itself upon me that I had never really wished the truth, but only to ventilate my own ability in discovering it. I was getting sick to death in fact with a sense of my down-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162, from *Society the Redeemed Form of Man*.

right intellectual poverty and dishonesty. My studious mental activity had served manifestly to base a mere 'castle in the air'; and the castle had vanished in a brief bitter moment of time, leaving not a wrack behind. I never felt again the most passing impulse, even, to look where it stood, having done with it forever. Truth, indeed! How should a beggar like me be expected to discover it? How should any man or woman born pretend to such ability? Truth must reveal *itself* if it would be known; and even then how imperfectly known at best! For truth is God, the omniscient and omnipotent God; and who shall pretend to comprehend that great and adorable perfection? And yet who that aspires to the name of man, would not cheerfully barter all that he knows of life for a bare glimpse of the hem of its garment?'<sup>1</sup>

These words might well be taken as an admirable sceptic manifesto of nescience, and if Henry James, Sr, had read them over to himself and inwardly pondered them each day, the resultant scepticism of both him and his son Henry might have been very different.

In summarizing 'Father's ideas', which so powerfully affected his second son, Anderson concludes that it is our selfhood which persuades us that 'the phenomenal is the only reality' and by which we incur 'the guilt which comes with acquisition'. As a counter weight to 'the evil of self-righteousness' we must admit our own ignorance.

'The last step in philosophy will be the *docta ignorantia*, the conclusion that without knowing God we can know nothing truly; the last gasp of the strenuous moral will is to be the admission that we cannot will the good. . . .'<sup>2</sup>

Not able to know or to will the good leaves man in the position of the placid sheep which James envied, humble in their nescience and prepared to receive the truth through God's revelation.

As if he were following the normal progression which we have

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162-3.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-5.

outlined as that of creative scepticism, Henry James, Sr, moved on promptly from these insights to an admirable awareness of the dualisms in man's experience—but pursuing a linear course, he unfortunately never returned. There is little doubt, as Anderson suggests, that the dualisms ferreted out by the elder James were all based ultimately upon 'those polarities within personality'<sup>1</sup> which constitute the ground swell of adolescent as of all later progression toward maturity. In James' case, Anderson diagnoses an 'emotional polarity of the sort familiar in those who assume a messianic role: a terrible arrogance completely disguised by a maternal care for the whole world'.<sup>2</sup> Generalizing on the basis of his own intimate experience (whether or not it is fairly judged by Anderson), Henry James, Sr, describes the condition of man in a way which recalls Thomas Browne's 'great Amphibium':

'Self-conceit and self-reproach, pride and penitence, thus make up the fever and the chill into which that great intermittent, which we call our moral and religious experience, ordinarily resolves itself.'<sup>3</sup>

It was chiefly his discovery at second hand that Swedenborg had recognized and spoken to this peculiar characteristic of man that drew him to the Swedish theologian, whom he thenceforward read intensively and took as his mentor, but whose ideas he used very differently from Emerson.

'I was glad to discover that any human being had so much even as proposed to shed the light of positive knowledge upon the soul's history, or bring into rational relief the alternate dark and bright or infernal and celestial phases of its finite constitution.'<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note in this connection that James' denunciation of Pantheism (always a crucial concept for Transcendentalists) centres around its unilateral functioning.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 159, *Substance and Shadow*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163, *Society* . . .

'... he [James] supposes it to exclude a dualism even of logical elements, and to represent the Divine as manifesting itself in phenomena by a simple outward movement without subsequent recoil.'<sup>1</sup>

Edgar Allan Poe in his 'Eureka' also insists upon alternate expansion and contraction in the life of the physical universe, what Anderson refers to as James' 'co-ordinates of the flux and reflux of creation'.<sup>2</sup> It is characteristic of James' humanism that, following both Blake and Swedenborg, he should conceive of the human form as embodying all the opposites exemplified in all the animals and plants of the world.

'... all the irreconcilable antagonisms of animate nature meet and kiss one another in the unity of the human form. It perfectly melts and fuses the most obdurate contrarieties in the lap of its own universality. It is this universality of the human form which endows it with the supremacy of nature, and fits it to embosom the Divine infinitude. . . . Thus the marriage I speak of [i.e. "between a common nature and a specific subject"] is perfectly ratified only in the human form, because in that form alone does the feminine or individual element bear any just ratio to the masculine and universal one. In short, man is the sole measure of the universe, because he alone combines in the form of his natural individuality every conceivable characteristic of universal life.'<sup>3</sup>

This elaborate footnote to Donne's 'subtle knot, which makes us man' puts James solidly into the sceptic camp because of his insight into the infinitude of dualisms and their inexplicable union in man.

James also laid the foundation for his novelist son's development of the opposition between Europe and America. In *Substance and Shadow* the father links appearance with Europe and reality with America. 'When America disavowed England's

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144n, W. James.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 9, *Christianity the Logic of Creation*.

church' and state,' says Anderson summarizing a passage in the same work, 'Americans became *as a people* the first effective manifestation of the possibility of living by an inward law.'<sup>1</sup> A sentiment like this raises the merely geographical dualism into the realm of its metaphysical implications.

It is not surprising, then, in view of this Jamesian concern with dualisms, that onlookers should seize upon contradictory labels to describe Henry James, Sr's insight into truth. As his son William says,

'It was optimistic in one sense, pessimistic in another. Pantheistic, idealistic, hegelian, are epithets that very naturally arise on the reader's lips to describe it; and yet some part there is of the connotation of each of these epithets that made my father violently refuse to submit to their imposition. . . . Dualism, yet monism, antinomianism, yet restraint; atheism (as we might almost name it—that is, the swallowing up of God in Humanity) as the last result of God's achievements—such are some of the first aspects of this at bottom very simple and harmonious view of the world.'<sup>2</sup>

To the analyst of creative scepticism the last portion of this description is highly significant. James' view of the world *was* 'very simple and harmonious', and therein perhaps lies the clue to what his novelist son was to build upon it.

No one could have been attracted to Swedenborg, for whatever reasons, without sooner or later becoming involved in paradox, which I have denominated the third phase of scepticism. However, 'the divine economy is of course a far more complex affair in Swedenborg than in James, who sought to reduce his account of it to a few basic antinomies (or a few well-chosen paradoxes)'.<sup>3</sup> He quickly moves on toward their reconciliation in 'the divine-natural humanity', a concept borrowed from Swedenborg to signify a regenerate social order, where the illusion of self

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-2.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

'has been swallowed up in men's love of each other as God loves them'. God at last becomes incarnated in 'a form that no longer contradicts his characters', for 'God's real creature is this aggregate Humanity'.<sup>1</sup> Contradictions are therefore for James, Sr, merely hurdles to be leaped and bear no fundamental relation to the structure of the universe. Once they are passed, the road is clear to a coherent picture of reality. This is why he can praise Emerson for genuine 'insight and not mere verbal ingenuity', asserting that if his work is sometimes obscure, 'it is never with the obscurity of paradox'.<sup>2</sup> If James had believed that paradox was a fundamental and indispensable pillar of Emerson's system, he would have considered Emerson to be arrested in mid-course, without having finally resolved the members of his philosophical chord. (We shall see later that James' estimate of Emerson provides an excellent clue to the missing parts of his own scepticism—or to those parts which he did not continue to take seriously.

An example of James' use of paradox which is not obscure is to be found in his conclusion that 'the final meaning of acquisition of every sort is that nothing can be owned'.<sup>3</sup> An important truth is bodied forth here but one which has no fundamental twist or knot below the surface. One thinks at once of many of his son's stories which admirably illustrate it. However, Henry James, Sr, struggled very hard against the simple nature of his paradoxes. This can be seen in his resentment toward anyone who would formulate his ideas into a system, and this in itself shows that he had the instincts of a creative sceptic even though he lacked some of the necessary qualifications. Says his son William:

'My father's own disgust at any abstract statement of his system could hardly be excelled by that of the most positivistic reader. I will not say that the logical relations of its terms were with him a mere afterthought; they were more organic than that. But the core and centre of the thing in him was always instinct and attitude, something realized at a stroke, and felt like a fire in his breast;

<sup>1</sup> Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 146, 'W J's Introduction. . .'.  
<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443, H. J [Sr], on Emerson (1887).    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

and all attempts at articulate verbal formulations of it were makeshifts of a more or less desperately impotent kind. This is why he despised every formulation he made as soon as it was uttered, and set himself to the Sisyphus-labor of producing a new one that should be less irrelevant. I remember hearing him groan, when struggling in this way, "Oh, that I might thunder it out in a single interjection that would tell the *whole* of it, and never speak a word again!" But he paid his tribute to necessity; and few writers in the end were more prolix than he.<sup>1</sup>

This insight of the psychologist into his father's works is extremely pertinent at this point, for it indicates the sharing by both Henry Jameses, father and son, of a recognition common to all creative sceptics: that even the clash of opposites in paradox is inadequate to set forth the truths which men grasp at the far reaches of their experience. Some other language must be devised, and at this problem both men worked desperately—if prolixly.

In so far as sceptics have come to any agreement concerning the nature of this language, they have concluded that it lies, somehow, in the realm of action, that if one is ultimately to know, one must arrive at that knowledge by doing, not by saying. The only adequate language, therefore, will be the language of action, whose creative possibilities far exceed those of words, no matter how qualified and fine-spun. The moral energies envisaged by Henry James, Sr, were always in motion, and therefore any 'still' shot of them would be a falsification of a kind which belongs to science not to philosophy. For him,

'the first requisite . . . of a man being a philosopher, is not to *think*, however comprehensively or profoundly, but to *become a living man* by the actual putting away of selfishness from his heart. For philosophy is not a system of thought reflecting the universe—this part belongs to science; it is an actual life of God in man's finite consciousness, marrying the two poles of nature

<sup>1</sup> Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

indissolubly together in a way forever to baffle and humiliate the scientific understanding.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with this implied conception of the nature of science, it is clear that James is following both a Transcendental and a sceptical tradition by insisting that truth must be 'proved upon the pulses'. His statement just quoted shows clearly the relation between dualism, paradox, and the language of action. It is in keeping with this manifesto that the senior James turns away from a static and conventional concept of God towards an activist and broadly human one which shall correspond to his expanding conception of the character of truth.

'... what I crave with all my heart and understanding—what my very flesh and bones cry out for—is no longer a Sunday but a week-day divinity, a working God, grimy with the dust and sweat of our most carnal appetites and passions, and bent not for an instant upon inflating our worthless pietistic righteousness, but upon the patient, toilsome, thorough cleansing of our physical and moral existence from the odious defilement it has contracted, until we each and all present at last in body and mind the deathless effigy of his own uncreated loveliness.'<sup>2</sup>

Some might call this concept of God atheistic—so difficult is it to express one's deepest thoughts in mere words.

Of all the kinds of activity in the world, Henry James, Sr, seized upon that of the artist as the prototype of 'divine-natural humanity' (the concept, as we have seen, which largely negated his scepticism) because, unlike that of the priest or the king, it is not concerned with personal recognition but is content to reflect as realistically as possible the nature of God in terms of the appearances of the world.

'He once called the artist "the only regenerate image of God in nature, the only living revelation of the Lord on earth" . . . we

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152, *Secret of Swedenborg*.



may say that the true artist is not a personage in the bad sense—he is a creative force, recognizable, as the creator himself is recognizable, *only in the quality of the thing he makes*. In other words, the law of all spiritual existence is that doing determines being, or that character is based upon action, not action upon character. Whatsoever one actually does when one is free from the coercion of necessity [nature] or the constraint of prudence [society] is the measure of what one really is." . . . The artist who surrenders his selfhood lives by "taste or spontaneous attraction"; he acquires his own tone or style."<sup>1</sup>

As James puts these truths in *Moralism and Christianity*:

'A perfect life, a life that is whose every act and word are true to the sovereign soul within, will ever be the truest revelation of God as it is the highest expression of Art.'<sup>2</sup>

This, for James, had been exemplified only once in human history, and that was in the person of Jesus Christ. When James thinks about the nature of God, he pushes his essential humanism to its farthest reaches.

'What a mere obscenity every great name in history confesses itself beside this spotless Judean youth, who in the thickest night of time—unhelped by priest, or ruler, by friend or neighbor, by father or mother, by brother or sister; helped, in fact, if we may so consider it, only by the dim expectant sympathy of that hungry rabble of harlots and outcasts who furnished his inglorious retinue, and still further drew upon him the ferocious scorn of all that was devout and honourable and powerful in his nation—yet let in eternal day-light upon the soul, by steadfastly expanding in his private spirit to the dimensions of universal humanity, so bringing, for the first time in history, the finite human bosom into perfect experimental accord with the infinite Divine Love. For

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120n.

my part, I am free to declare that I find the conception of any Divinity superior to this radiant human form inexpressibly treasonable to my own manhood. . . . I shall always cherish the most hearty atheism towards every deity but him who has illustrated my own nature with such resplendent power as to make me feel that *Man* henceforth is the only name of honor, and that any God out of the strictest human proportions, any God with essentially disproportionate aims and ends to man, is an unmixed superfluity and nuisance.<sup>1</sup>

This sketch for the nature of God, which is so congruent with the Transcendentalism of Emerson, might well have been labelled 'The Great Artist'.

On the basis of the above outline of the elder James' thought, which consciously or unconsciously was reproduced in the work of his novelist son, we are now prepared to consider the incomplete scepticism of Henry James, Jr. A clue to the deficiency of both Jameses' scepticism may be found in the father's reaction to his friend Emerson. Unlike Thoreau, who went to Walden to put into practice Emerson's advice in 'Nature' and 'The American Scholar', James tried to learn from Emerson the answers to several fundamental philosophical questions, and on this score he was always being frustrated. James showed himself at the nadir of the self-reliance which Emerson preached by asking the master directly what he should do with his life.

'Shall I get me a little nook in the country and communicate with my *living* kind—by life only—a word, may be, of *that* communication, a fit word, once a year? Or shall I follow some commoner method, learn science and bring myself first into men's respect, that thus I may the better speak to them? . . . Can the invisible Emerson then put up from his depths some heart-secret-law which shall find itself reproduced in mine and so further me, or at least *stay* me?'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-4, 'Henry James, Sr's *Literary Remains*'.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

In another letter to Emerson it becomes obvious that James makes more extensive demands than any sceptic is willing to make concerning the human intelligibility of the universe.

'I am led, quite without any conscious wilfulness either, to seek the *laws* of these appearances that swim round us in God's great museum—to get hold of some central *facts* which may make all other facts properly circumferential, and *orderly so*—and you continually dishearten me by your apparent indifference to such law and central facts: by the dishonour you seem to cast upon our intelligence, as if it stood much in our way. Now my conviction at present is that my intelligence is the necessary digestive apparatus for my life.'<sup>1</sup>

Here the cat is out of the bag, and it is apparent in spite of the elder James' brave words condemning opinionativeness and praising the *docta ignorantia*, that what he is really aiming at is a formula which will solve, once for all, the riddles of the world. When he praises intelligence as 'the necessary digestive apparatus', he is implying that nothing which his intelligence cannot encompass can possibly be meaningful for him. This separates him at once from the creative possibilities which an active nescience is always turning up. It was Emerson's perennial experience of discovering the inadequacy of the ideas he himself had worked out which accounted for his 'apparent indifference to such law'. His nescience prepared him at any moment to abandon the truths he had settled upon if a deeper and more inclusive truth should loom before him. James, having decided that it is only by becoming morally implicated in the existing society that man can be saved, is shocked by Emerson's deviation into self-sufficiency (a misunderstanding of Emerson's Self-reliance) because this, James is sure, will cause him to discount, as Emerson in fact does, the sense of original sin and so lead to self-righteousness—the most serious transgression of which James thinks man is capable. James had worked out his own theory that

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

'as persons, men are nothing, that work, activity is everything, so that the best man is exemplified in the artist, a man wholly sunk in his work, who makes no personal claims.'<sup>1</sup>

If Emerson could only have subscribed to this, instead of exercising his isosothenic rights and insisting on the equally valid claims of personalism, James would have been happy in this triumph of the 'necessary digestive apparatus' of ratiocination. Intelligence would have prevailed, and his world would have become understandable. Lacking the power of tidying up Emerson's intellectual landscapes James expresses his frustration by addressing him as 'Oh you man without a handle!'<sup>2</sup> The creative sceptics of the world are notoriously handleless, and herein lies their strength—as perhaps also the source of others' exasperation with them.

As a late figure of what has been called the American renaissance, Henry James, Jr, was trying, as did his father, humanistically to work out a set of secular values which should be more adequate than those by which the people around him were living. His values, as we can see, were variations on those of his father—fundamentally his father's, yet given a distinctive twist of his own. He took over from the older generation of Transcendentalists a distrust of institutions—both political and religious—and a faith in human variety and spontaneity as bearing the seeds of regeneration. For this reason he considered the realistic novelist a kind of moralist who presents the world transformed by 'the illimitable alchemy of art'<sup>3</sup> and in so presenting it enables the reader to grasp its moral implications without imposing a morality upon the reader. With reference to the continental novelists who were his contemporaries, this method of world-transformation represents not only the triumph of humanism but also a kind of higher realism, unafraid—as James boasted—of moral implications. However, had he been a bit more aware of the moral implications—motivated, actually, by nescience rather than by the anti-moralistic bias of which he accuses novelists—he might have

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 8n.

caught a richer meaning in his own novels and exemplified more faithfully the pattern of creative scepticism.

One of the most sceptical features to be found in both the father and the son is their constant disavowal of having themselves devised philosophical systems. We have already heard the elder James on this subject, and we find his sentiments echoed in his novelist son's estimate of his father's philosophy.

'His *tone*, that is, always so effectually looked out, and the living parts of him so singularly hung together, that one may fairly say his philosophy *was* his tone.'<sup>1</sup>

This recalls the father's understandable desire to express all at once the truths he has intuited instead of resorting to tedious paragraphs of explanation. Yet it can be shown that because neither James could take seriously his own nescience, the result in both cases turned out to be a well-defined if not elaborate system instead of, as with the creative sceptics of Transcendentalism, a principle and a direction always subject to correction as new light appeared. Anderson summarizes succinctly the chief ideological framework upon which the output of the two men was hung.

'"Father's ideas" had a simple basis, which made possible their ramifications and involutions. What the novelist was from infancy so sure of that he never dreamed of questioning it was that his father had been quite right about experience. There were two ways of *taking* it, the selfish way and the loving way, and those who took it in the former, accepted conventional forms while those who took it in the latter, made their own forms, and arrived at a style which was a worthy container of all that was precious and noble.'<sup>2</sup>

This insight is a lofty one, without which the literature of America and of the world would be poorer, but the characteristic thought-quality which one finds in such Transcendentalists as Emerson and

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-2, *Notes of a Son and Brother*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

Melville is lacking in both Jameses, and this difference can be accounted for by the absence of a serious nescience in an otherwise sceptical pattern of thought.

The father's annoyance with Emerson for not always emphasizing the intelligence as a 'necessary digestive apparatus' is reflected in the son's persistent unwillingness to admit into his stories those forms of consciousness which are unintelligible—at least to the author.

'Of course no one can be assured that James was never frightened by the silence of infinite spaces; the point is that the bias of his fiction is a convincing testimony to his sense that in art one must deal with consciousness as if it were intelligible through and through.'<sup>1</sup>

The raw material of existence, concerning which one must admit that he knows nothing fundamentally, is rejected by James the novelist except in so far as he can render it intelligible and fit it into the plan of his story. In this connection it is noteworthy that his earlier stories contain much more material which is extraneous than do the later ones, where nothing is mentioned which is not going to prove significant later on. Not that the characters themselves are always knowledgeable and aware of what is happening. If they were, there would be no story. But the omniscient author is always at hand to set them right and to reveal what they had never guessed. He is saying to his characters (and through them to his readers), 'Things are not what they seem' and spending the length of the story or novel pointing this out. Mr and Mrs Monarch were not 'the real thing' in the short story of that name; the beast for whose spring John Marcher waited was not the beast he expected (in 'The Beast in the Jungle'); nor did the image Spencer Brydon confronted in 'The Jolly Corner' represent what he anticipated. At one of the points of crisis in *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly Theale accuses Lord Mark of ignorance when he thinks of himself as the most knowing of men.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9

"... you all here know each other—I see that—so far as you know anything. You know what you're used to, and it's your being used to it—that, and that only—that makes you. But there are things you don't know." "Things that *I* don't—with all the pains I take and the way I've run about the world to leave nothing unlearned?"

'Milly thought, and it was perhaps the very truth of his claim—its not being negligible—that sharpened her impatience and thereby her wit. "You're *blasé*, but you're not enlightened. You're familiar with everything, but conscious really of nothing. What I mean is that you've no imagination."<sup>1</sup>

Behind such passages as this lies the assumption that what is not known could be known if only there occurred a shift in viewpoint—just as the rope which was mistaken for a snake can be known for a rope and the conch shell be no longer mistaken for a piece of silver. In this respect, James has much in common with the Sankara school of Vedanta, as elucidated by Das Gupta:

'An illusion cannot last when the truth is known; what is truth is known to us, but what is illusion is undemonstrable, unspeakable, and indefinite. The illusion runs on from beginningless time; we do not know how it is related to truth, the Brahman, but we know that when the truth is once known the false knowledge of his world-appearance disappears once for all. No intermediate link is necessary to effect it, no mechanical dissociation of *buddhi* or *manas*, but just as by finding out the glittering piece to be a conch shell the illusory perception of silver is destroyed, so this illusory perception of world-appearance is also destroyed by a true knowledge of the reality, the Brahman.'<sup>2</sup>

Similarly in James' 'The Figure in the Carpet' we are never told what the figure in the carpet of the novelist's work was, but it is likewise never hinted that it is an unintelligible figure or that

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> S. Das Gupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1951), I, 441-2.

perhaps several equally valid figures could not be traced there. In other words, Henry James, Jr, is never at a loss in constructing handles; he is always graspable, as his father discovered Emerson was not. Once the Jameses have worked out their pattern of truth, they are unprepared for the eventuality that it may need to be superseded, that the world may turn out to be exactly the opposite of their description of it, unprepared, that is, for the final impact of Brahman which will destroy their beloved world-appearance. *Isothenia* they had never learned from the Pyrrhonists, as both Emerson and Melville had, with the concomitant addition of depth and complexity to their writing. Neither of the Jameses could ever envisage a kind of metaphysical circularity in which they would return to their starting-point and be forced to rethink all their basic assumptions. The creative works of the novelist represent, rather, a clear and traceable development culminating in the great final novels which Anderson considers a trilogy—*The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*—where his thought reaches its highest articulateness.

But if the whole figure misses being that of the creative sceptic, it yet coincides at several points with the sceptic pattern, and these are extremely significant and constitute the reason why the analogy was broached in the first place. In the matter of dualisms, Henry James, Jr, expands the opposition between Europe and America about which his father had speculated and uses that as the basis for his treatment of the 'international situation'.

'Europe was steeped [the father saw] in the providentially necessary delusion that the works of the Law alone profited a man; America, again providentially, was the scene on which men had begun to realize that the Law was but scaffolding surrounding the glorious tabernacle of individualism universalized. It is this contradiction which provides the rationale of the "international situation" in the works of the novelist. Technically it was a god-send to his drama, affording not simply an opportunity for a realistic commentary on manners, but a chance to clothe in circumstance conflicts of an elemental sort: it became the basis of



James' profound melodrama which employs aspects of human consciousness as character.<sup>1</sup>

One can almost see this aspect of the philosophy of the father looking for an outlet in fiction, seeking an adequate myth. The dualism of America and Europe was one which people in the novelist's day found increasingly sharp and significant, as Atlantic travel increased. Therefore this opposition could appropriately be seized upon as the symbol of a timeless spiritual conflict within the individual—that between the letter and the spirit.

'The question for James was how to symbolize our relation to ourselves—how spontaneity in the given situation was related to righteousness or greed. European manners and artistic achievements came to stand for the realm of the particular; American spontaneity and good faith for that of the universal. The antithesis turned out to be indispensable to the artist.'<sup>2</sup>

The contrast became, as Anderson says, one between moral spontaneity and institutionalized manners. James' heroines are always American girls who bring a fresh breath of integrity and an unconventional point of view into the rigidities of European society. A thoroughgoing scepticism would have led James to criticize his own rigidities even though he had worked them out for himself (instead of adopting them from any institution), or it would have led him to balance isothermally the institutional against the spontaneous or to work out through the spontaneous a more acceptable form of the institutional. Moreover, the genuine sceptic would continually subject this more acceptable form to searching criticism and would be ready at any moment to abandon it if it proved inadequate to the uses of truth. Like so many of his Transcendentalist predecessors, James was led to elaborate a picture of America and her role in the world which recalls that of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who called the Americans 'the Romans of

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

the modern world, the great assimilating people'. The picture is akin, too, to Whitman's vision of America as a bridge between the Orient and the Occident, as in the rhapsodies of his 'Passage to India'. The following is quoted from a letter written when Henry James, Jr, was twenty-five:

'I think that to be an American is an excellent preparation for culture. We have exquisite qualities as a race, and it seems to me that we are ahead of the European races in the fact that more than either of them we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically, &c) claim our property wherever we find it. To have no national stamp has hitherto been a regret and a drawback, but I think it not unlikely that American writers may yet indicate that a vast intellectual fusion and synthesis of the various National tendencies of the world is the condition of more important achievements than any we have seen. We must of course have something of our own—something distinctive and homogeneous—and I take it that we shall find it in our moral consciousness, our unprecedented spiritual lightness and vigor.'<sup>1</sup>

That his 'spiritual lightness' should, lacking continual scrutiny, too soon settle into the rigidities of merely another moral system is the perennial risk—one which Henry James did not take as seriously as did Emerson and Melville.

A thread of other dualisms, all intimately related to the central American-European one, runs through the corpus of James' work. He symbolizes these variously as the serpent and the dove, Blakean innocence and experience, the beautiful and the horrible, the artistic impulse versus righteousness and greed. None but the artist, James feels, can acknowledge frankly his dual nature, and none but the artist can use this nature creatively. To choose between the halves of a dualism, James maintains in spite of his incomplete scepticism, is to misappropriate the dualism. This, as

<sup>1</sup> *HLJ*, pp. 127-30.

Anderson notes, is what Strether does in *The Ambassadors*. Either his Massachusetts home town or Paris, Strether thinks, must represent the right values, whereas both Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima* are aware that they must come to terms with the dual nature of their worlds, which means a re-examination of their own duality too.<sup>1</sup>

Paradox, the third stage of creative scepticism, represents in one sense the reconciling of the two halves of a dualism but more characteristically the holding of the two together in the tension of polarity. In the stories of Henry James this latter kind of paradox is more often represented than discussed; hence the difficulty of putting one's finger on it. His style itself may be considered the mediating force reconciling all kinds of dualisms in so far as it represents the creative wholeness which will not relinquish any part of the vision of life. That paradox was no stranger in the James household is amusingly set forth by William James.

'The literal played as small a part in our education as it perhaps ever played in any, and we wholesomely breathed inconsistency and ate and drank contradictions. The presence of paradox was so bright among us—though fluttering ever with as light a wing and as short a flight as need have been—that we fairly grew used to allow, from an early time, for the so many and odd declarations we heard launched, to the extent of happily "discounting" them; the moral of all of which was that we need never fear not to be good enough if we were only social enough: a splendid meaning indeed being attached to the latter term.'<sup>2</sup>

Here is the father's system in miniature, based solidly upon the virtues of paradox. But without an underlying nescience, the Jamesian paradoxes always tend to become solidified instead of undergoing a continual revision which makes sure that the oppositions are kept clashing instead of becoming assimilated at a

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

midpoint where they may tend to quiet down into dogmatism. One of the paradoxes which James exemplifies is that 'to turn away from one's self is to meet one's self in another form'.<sup>1</sup> Both the Princess Casamassima and Spencer Brydon work out the implications of this paradox in their own lives and become wiser as this paradoxical truth breaks upon them. Again, the world which Hyacinth Robinson confronts is referred to as a 'beautiful horrible world', as if by setting down these antonyms James thought he could project a kind of truth which neither could adequately describe. Here once more the problem is one which Montaigne identified as peculiarly that of the Pyrrhonist—the creation of a new language.

James is adept at choosing figures which set forth this fundamental quality of the paradox. He shares with his father the figure of the plant which must grow down in order to grow up, and to this he adds the figure of the screw, the turning phlanges of which likewise represent motion both down and up. As Anderson says,

'The complication of the figure of the screw is such as to serve precisely the need of describing the involvement of man in God and God in man. I find so much precision in the figure that I cannot doubt James's intention.'<sup>2</sup>

The downward movement of both plant and screw represents the development of one's selfhood or separation from God while the upward movement stands for union with God. Thus is represented what Anderson calls the self-contradiction of Transcendentalism.

'If we are to understand Emerson (or Thoreau, or Whitman, or even the final metaphysical speculations of William James), we must consider the paradox of the individual who is somehow to be universalized and yet in essence remain himself.'<sup>3</sup>

Another paradoxical figure which James elaborates is that of roundness as contrasted with angularity, and here we are reminded of both Emerson's and Melville's use of circularity. Adam Verver

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 202-3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

in *The Golden Bowl* thinks of his son-in-law, who represents all the spiritual riches of Europe in perfect balance, as composed of roundness.

'It all came then, the great clearance, from the one prime fact that the Prince, by good fortune, hadn't proved angular. He clung to that description of his daughter's husband as he often did to terms and phrases, in the human, the social connexion, that he had found for himself: it was his way to have times of using these constantly, as if they had just then lighted the world, or his own path in it, for him—even when for some of his interlocutors they covered less ground. To the Prince himself, Adam puts it thus: "You're round, my boy . . . you're *all*, you're variously and inexhaustibly round, when you might by all the chances have been abominably square".'<sup>1</sup>

James' intuition here of the whole truth toward which he is striving and his devising of meaningful symbols to express it represent his contribution to the new language which Pyrrhonism must devise.

As Anderson sees James' progression, it is from one vocabulary to another until he moves beyond words. Referring to the climax of *The Wings of the Dove*, he says:

' . . . the last phase is signalized by his [James'] attempt to get Kate to see that the wonderful spectacle of Milly enacting her sacrifice has been *in itself* a consummation. The last vocabulary, that is, is beyond words: It is vision. Yet Kate sees only a series of appearances which may or may not indicate that they are to get the money.'<sup>2</sup>

Again the nescience of a character is transcended by the vision of the novelist, and this vision moves away from words in the direction of sacrificial action toward which paradox points. Anderson distinguishes James' symbols from 'the symbolist analysis of the function of language' and concludes that

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

'His emblems are the icons of the unified consciousness, an account of being which is expressed in, but not created by, language.'<sup>1</sup>

As language moves from paradox to symbol to vision, its destination is that 'language of action' in which creative scepticism always finds its highest expression. William James, in trying to account for the unsatisfactoriness of his father's literary production and specifically for the thinness of his concept of 'divine-natural humanity', inadvertently makes a perspicacious evaluation of his brother's work. William says:

'This is the inevitable result of trying to express didactically and articulately, in the form of a story, what in its origin is more like an intuition, sentiment, or attitude of the soul.'<sup>2</sup>

The novelist son, to be sure, succeeded better than his father in expressing their common 'attitude of the soul', and his method was that of emphasizing what is moving and on-going as against what is static, of therefore apotheosizing the living person rather than the dead and petrified portrait.

'Abstractly considered, the portrait theme provides a moral sanction for an aesthetic principle. The aesthetically pictorial, taken alone, is the morally static or selfish. The artist must employ appearances, pictorial values, but if he is truly an artist, he will invariably subordinate them to realities, to dramatic values. This is in keeping with the elder James's emphasis on the consummatory moral impetus which drives us toward union with God and our fellows. Stasis, arrest, fixity, are evil. But there is no absolute evil except the attempt to appropriate a representative of conscience in the form of an image. To do this is to take the letter for the spirit, the portrait for the lady, to be an arch-criminal, such as Gilbert Osmond or Lord Mark.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Matthiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

The praise of action and life as the only adequate means of expressing truth is involved for James with his symbolic use of 'the house of life',

'James's most inclusive emblem for the archetypal human situation: Man first attempts to take possession of the house of life, but finally learns that it is his task to celebrate it. What he celebrates is not particular forms, but the current of life which creates form, the "reverberant" flux of creation itself, which resounds as it does in Isabel Archer's imagination, like a sea-shell, or, as in Brooke's case, makes the air of the Campagna "bright with sheeted ghosts".'<sup>1</sup>

This symbol in its fictional ramifications in the stories of Henry James represents an advance over the presentation of similar ideas by his father, just as fiction is by its nature better adapted than philosophy to body forth a current of the 'flux of creation itself'. Thus James reaches his heights and may be considered as having said his last word in the trilogy mentioned above, in which he praises as the acme of human goodness the action of those who 'apprehend the lives of others as aesthetic finalities',<sup>2</sup> who discover self-fulfilment by living in and for other human beings and thus constitute that 'society the redeemed form of man' toward which his father strove and often agonized. The nobility of this system of thought and its far-reaching implications cannot be questioned; but after all, it does represent a kind of dogmatism in that an equally valid case might be made for the opposite point of view, and the attempt to hold together these two would undoubtedly open out even wider vistas of truth, unglimped by either Henry James at the farthest point of his development. But in order to be capable of this, either of them would have needed to discard those handles whose absence the elder James lamented in Emerson, to discard all handles, along with whatever else would interfere with circularity, and be prepared from time to time to admit complete nescience and set off on a new adventure in search of truth. Great

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

## HENRY JAMES, INCOMPLETE SCEPTIC

as was Henry James the novelist's contribution to the development of scepticism by elaborating dualisms and by working out the ramifications of the language of action, centring about his concept of style, he can never be classed as more than an incomplete sceptic since his vision of the world leaves no opening for the unknown or the irrational but encompasses only what belongs to consciousness—albeit a rich and wide-ranging and extremely subtle consciousness.



## X

## HENRY ADAMS, UNEASY SCEPTIC



No one who reads carefully *The Education of Henry Adams* can come away from it without feeling that Adams' pursuit of what he calls education was essentially an epistemological quest and that he could have been satisfied by nothing less than a mystic experience—the having looked on truth bare. Since he was destined not to achieve this goal but to spend his eighty years in what he considered a fruitless search for education (including training in the methods and limits of truth-seeking), perhaps some light can be thrown on his experience by noting that on the basis of evidence supplied principally by *The Education* plus *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* it seems clear that in his wrestling with the problem of how truth is to be achieved he exhibits many of the thought patterns which have historically been associated with scepticism—the classic philosophy in which epistemology has counted for the most. Principally Adams exemplifies scepticism's nescience and secondarily its concern with dualisms. However, he must be called an uneasy rather than a creative sceptic because he did not go on to explore with any thoroughness those other essential phases of scepticism: paradox and knowing through doing. Although there were elements in his thought ('accidental education', 'dynamism', and even 'futilitarian silence') which, if developed, could have crowned his scepticism and made it fruitful, there were also impeding factors such as the eighteenth-century education which he alternately praised and blamed, his enthusiasm for evolutionary (and hence linear) hypotheses, and, ironically, the admitted remnants of a dogmatic Puritanism. Thus a generation after the Transcendentalists there appeared an American thinker who brilliantly reinforced some phases of their own scepticism and who seemed to have set out on the same road

but who, perhaps because he lacked confidence in the irrational and intuitive as ways to truth, just missed rounding out the pattern which might have been put to creative use in shaping the education which he died lamenting he had not achieved.

Although the epistemological overtones of Adams' pursuit of education are heard like a high-pitched continuum throughout most of *The Education*, they become unmistakable when the pursuit turns back upon itself, as it were, and Adams is faced with the dilemma of educating another generation of students at Harvard College. His own education he could continue treating by turns as a bore, a failure, or a frustration, but what must he do when confronted with responsibility for the education of others—if, indeed, one can ever assume that responsibility for another? What truth was he to pass on to his students? As we shall see, the clue to his central educational problem may lie in the very possibility of his asking such a question as this.

As distinguished from the parent, who merely gives life, or from the murderer, who merely takes it, Adams felt the almost overwhelming responsibility of the teacher, who 'affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops. A teacher is expected to teach truth, and may perhaps flatter himself that he does so, if he stops with the alphabet or the multiplication table. . . .'<sup>1</sup> Adams had learned painfully since the days when he himself was an undergraduate at Harvard College how meagre and practically non-existent was his own store of truths that mattered, and he could not hypocritically set himself up as the dispenser of a wisdom he did not possess. 'He frankly acted on the rule that a teacher who knew nothing of his subject should not pretend to teach his scholars what he did not know, but should join them in trying to find the best ways of learning it.'<sup>2</sup> What this 'it' was and whether or how it could be known constituted the heart of Adams' search for education.

In one of the speeches of the scientist Strong, a character in Adams' novel *Esther*, lies a clue to *The Education's* repeated

<sup>1</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York [1931]), p. 300.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

confessions of ignorance, to the nescience by which chiefly Adams qualifies as a sceptic and to his discontent with whatever in his experience should normally have yielded education. Strong finds that he cannot go on like his companions glibly discussing 'truths' when he is not at all sure how, or whether, they can be attained. "My trouble is to find out how we can get hold of the truth at all."<sup>1</sup> He pursues his scientific researches, therefore, hoping that some day, as a kind of by-product and almost by accident, he or his fellows will turn up the missing key to the universe, the modern equivalent of the philosopher's stone. "We may some day catch an abstract truth by the tail, and then we shall have our religion and immortality."<sup>2</sup> The evolutionary tendance of this speculation, its assumption of simple linear progression from point to point, is evident in what follows: "Infinity is infinitely more intelligible to you than you are to a sponge. If the soul of a sponge can grow to be the soul of Darwin, why may we not all grow up to abstract truth? What more do you want?"<sup>3</sup> While this character cannot be wholly identified with Henry Adams at any point in his career, there does seem to arise behind the historian's search for education and his persistent lament over his ignorance the vague hope that somewhere in the universe there lies, ready-made and awaiting discovery, the intellectual *summum bonum* toward which all education should lead and by means of which the inexplicable riddles of the world will be solved and the disparate pieces made to fall into an orderly scheme. The same kind of hope characterized the intellectual approach of his grandfather, John Quincy Adams, as he is described by another grandson, Brooks Adams.

'Granting that there is a benign and omnipotent Creator of the world, who watches over the fate of men, Adams' sincere conviction was that such a being thinks according to certain fixed laws, which we call scientific laws; that these laws may be dis-

<sup>1</sup> Henry Adams, *Esther, a Novel* (Frances Snow Compton), introd. Robt. E. Spiller. Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints (New York, 1938), p. 271.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

covered by human intelligence and when discovered may be adapted to human uses.<sup>1</sup>

The connection backward to Bacon and forward to Darwin is unmistakable here. The sources (in the history of ideas) of this hope lie jointly in the dogmatic Puritanism which Henry Adams thought he had left far behind and in the eighteenth-century rationalism in which he was admittedly steeped. Let us look now at the quality of the nescience which it produced in the grandson and which marks the first station along the sceptic way.

## I

Adams is not, like some autobiographers, merely presenting a series of incidents each set down in the spirit in which it was experienced and therefore culminating in an unforeseeable dénouement, if any. Rather he looks back over his long life and seeks, in the very telling of the story, the foci of its meaning, the chief of which turns out to be that he was perpetually and perennially ignorant. This is not a pose on Adams' part, nor is it Socratic irony although the two are near cousins by reason of the two men's participation in scepticism. Within the first few pages of the autobiography Adams questions whether if given foresight and choice, the child would have opted for such an unknowing life as his had turned out to be. 'Had he been consulted, would he have cared to play the game at all, holding such cards as he held, and suspecting that the game was to be one of which neither he nor anyone else back to the beginning of time knew the rules or the risks or the stakes?'<sup>2</sup> One hears echoes, in this question, of Adams' favourite contemporary poet, Matthew Arnold:

And we are here as on a darkling plain,  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

<sup>1</sup> Brooks Adams, 'The Heritage of Henry Adams', in Henry Adams, *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (New York: Capricorn Books [1958]), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Education*, p. 4.

The rest of the autobiography is practically a series of variations on this theme of nescience. From a self-sought mission to Palermo when Garibaldi was operating there, Adams returned not with what he felt the tourist would have called a knowledge of men but rather with 'knowledge of one's ignorance of men'.<sup>1</sup> The future historian observed too many facets of Garibaldi's character during a brief interview to settle for any stereotype which he could devise—and moreover he wondered whether the revolutionist himself were not 'the vigorous player in the game he did not understand'.<sup>2</sup> Adams' own nescience made him peculiarly sensitive to the same quality in other men, a quality often unobserved by more dogmatic and superficial thinkers. In the American crisis of 1860-61, with rare opportunities of analyzing high government officials and their motives, 'all that Henry Adams ever saw in man was a reflection of his own ignorance'.<sup>3</sup> What shocked him was that although as a young secretary he could hardly be expected to know what ought to be done to preserve the Union, 'none knew what should be done, or how to do it'.<sup>4</sup> The final ironic twist was given to this stab of recognition by the fact that there were some forthright people who did not share this humbling nescience and upon whom therefore a more naïve observer might have depended for wisdom. But these men were less to be trusted than the others because of their very lack of awareness. 'The few people who thought they knew something were more in error than those who knew nothing'.<sup>5</sup> As if it were not sufficiently disheartening to carry his own burden of ignorance, the scholar found himself 'jostled of a sudden by a crowd of men who seem to him ignorant that there is a thing called ignorance'.<sup>6</sup>

Marked by this kind of experience, which had come to be the norm for him by the time he was twenty-two, Henry Adams was ten years later offered by President Eliot a history professorship at Harvard College, and what in another temperament might have provoked robustious and irreverent laughter merely deepened

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

Adams' sense of his own 'mischievous' ignorance. By this time, after having ploughed through 'oceans of ignorance', he was uncomfortable in his nescience (else he would never have qualified as any kind of sceptic) though pretty well reconciled to it. When he told President Eliot that he knew nothing about medieval history, the reply was merely that if he could name someone who knew more, Eliot would appoint him. When, however, Adams looked up from his own ignorance (as he had done in Washington) to see men about him who seemed tragically and ironically undisturbed by both their ignorance and his, he decided to accept the Harvard offer; it slowly broke through to him, and constituted a vital part of his education, that professors are appointed not because they are men who know, except superficially, the subject they are to teach but for some other unfathomable or irrelevant reason. With this frank and, one might have thought, devastating recognition, he undertook the task of teaching undergraduates how to seek those answers which he could not give them because he himself was still a seeker. Unlike his colleagues in chemistry, physics, and political science, who seemed to know what they had to teach, he 'could teach his students nothing; he was only educating himself at their cost'.<sup>1</sup>

Years later, during the Theodore Roosevelt administration, Adams reached a point where he should, according to his own calculations, have been on the verge of grasping by the tail that abstract truth which the scientist Strong envisioned. He felt he could see clearly and plot with reasonable accuracy the purely mechanical forces at work in the contemporary political scene. He knew intimately 'the inmost thoughts of his own government'<sup>2</sup>—however, he did not know 'every relative value of persons'. His tone at this point reflects an essential metaphysical or epistemological fright. 'He seemed to know nothing—to be groping in darkness—to be falling in space; and the worst depth consisted in the assurance, incredible as it seemed, that no one knew more.'<sup>3</sup> However, instead of attributing his plight to those unknown quantities, the Czar, the Kaiser, and the Mikado, he felt that if they

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

had, like John Hay, 'taught him all they knew, he would still have known nothing. They knew nothing themselves. Only by comparison with their ignorance could the student measure his own.'<sup>1</sup> One gets the idea from such passages that Adams' nescience amounted, at least superficially, to something of an occupational hazard. As a historian he was equipped to set down the record, but he could scarcely forbear stopping himself in full career and asking what all this meant, for it was the meaning alone that justified setting down the record. Adams puts the dilemma thus: 'The historian must not try to know what is truth, if he values his honesty; for if he cares for his truths, he is certain to falsify his facts'.<sup>2</sup> This seems to suggest that the fact itself is an unknown, and perhaps if it is so dependent upon the quality of one's truths, it may not even possess a verifiable character. Of what use could the longed-for 'abstract truth' be in such a situation? Or must it perhaps come apocalyptically like deliverance from on high just when man's hopes have touched their absolute nadir?

When, in the later years of his life, Adams tried desperately to catch up with scientific thinking in the belief that perhaps biologists, chemists, physicists, or even psychologists (those professors whom he had half-envied at Harvard for the relative tidiness and security of their disciplines) might be on the verge of turning up the missing abstract truth, he found himself confronted by what he describes variously as a paradise, a mountain, and finally the all too familiar and countervailing abyss of ignorance. This, however, was for the most part the ignorance of a tyro and not the ignorance of an expert. He knew the exhilaration of thinking in new dimensions, where his nescience seemed more legitimate and bearable than in the field of history. Significantly, having plumbed the depths of nescience in the scientific disciplines as well as in the historical, he described his state in a chapter entitled 'The Abyss of Ignorance'. There he pictures himself as turning finally to the Virgin of Chartres for light by which to discover the truth. She refers to the Christ, with whom she is one,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

and says, 'We have little or nothing to do with God's other energies which are infinite, and concern us the less because our interest is only in man, and the infinite is not knowable to man'.<sup>1</sup> This, with its implications of both humanism and scepticism, sounds very like Raphael's reply to Adam's uncontrolled intellectual curiosity:

. . . to know  
That which before us lies in daily life,  
Is the prime Wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

The answer which Henry Adams had heard the church of the twelfth century giving to Abelard (author of *Sic et Non*), when the force of Abelard's logic drove him to ask unanswerable questions, was 'that where we know so little, we had better hold our tongues'.<sup>3</sup> Strangely enough, this was the very point which British science had been enforcing since Bacon, having derived the distinction from Chrysostom, first paid lip service to 'the book of God's word' and then turned all his attention to 'the book of God's works'—'that one must not try to know the unknowable, though one was quite powerless to ignore it'.<sup>4</sup> The paradoxical quality of this situation neither Bacon nor Adams, perhaps for different reasons, was prepared to explore or exploit. It might have led them straight along the high road to a creative use of the dilemma.

The nineteenth-century science in which the Baconian option (in favour of God's works) had eventually issued did not feel obliged, even after its exploration of the knowable, to draw its conclusions together into a unified structure but left that to the great system-makers to come. They did not come fast; not one modern Aquinas raised his head. This reluctance of modern science to synthesize and unify strikingly parallels Adams' professed ideal for the discipline of history—to record a series of

<sup>1</sup> Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (Boston, [1913]), p. 428.

<sup>2</sup> *Paradise Lost*, Book 8, ll. 92-4.

<sup>3</sup> *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, pp. 291-2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428.



facts uncontaminated by abstract truths or by the concern for such truths. Adams, therefore, although he longed desperately for the security of oneness, felt impelled to deny unity rather than to be caught in the 'dragnet of religion', where since 'Thought alone was Form[,] Mind and Unity flourished or perished together'.<sup>1</sup> He realized that to fly in the face of that unity whose existence and importance all the world had assumed (probably for very good psychological reasons) was impossible without a completely new education, and he had no second life in which to undertake this. Nevertheless, he was forced to reject logical unity. He glimpsed the possibility, moreover, that unity in the human personality at least offered some kind of balance, however precarious and perhaps unnatural, and that 'the only absolute truth was the sub-conscious chaos below, which everyone could feel when he sought it'.<sup>2</sup> If this were to be Strong's 'abstract truth', then Adams had more 'by the tail' than he had bargained for. He could not conceive of himself as an intellectual Columbus venturing upon these unknown and troubled seas. Nevertheless, at the climax of the inner turmoil described in 'The Abyss of Ignorance', when he has retraced the historical sceptic pattern from nescience to dualism, specifically the dualism of unity and multiplicity, he has already blocked out his two best-known books *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres: a Study of Thirteenth-Century Unity* and *The Education of Henry Adams: a Study of Twentieth-Century Multiplicity*.

Before we move on to look at what he does with dualisms, let us stop to savour the peculiar irony, if not cynicism, of the position in which his nescience had landed him. He had pictured the scientists as murmuring '*Ignoramus* under their breath' while not daring 'to assert the *Ignorabimus* that lay on the tips of their tongues'.<sup>3</sup> He himself when picturing the revered Gibbon struggling with the problem of Rome's meaning dared conclude, half in amusement and half in despair, 'Perhaps it meant nothing'.<sup>4</sup> This desperate honesty, however, was as hard for him to practise

<sup>1</sup> *Education*, p. 429.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

as England's recognition of the Confederacy had once been for him to admit. In both cases the reverse of his assumptions had turned out to be the only tenable position. 'He had to learn—the sooner the better—that his ideas were the reverse of truth. . . .'<sup>1</sup> Emerson, in the previous generation, had been able to build a way of life upon the repeated recognition of this sometimes shattering fact. Adams, as the heir of a simpler and more rationalistic stream of thought, had called Emerson's thinking '*naïf*'—perhaps because he still hoped somewhere, up ahead, to find that philosopher's stone of 'abstract truth'. It was, unfortunately, in a spirit more cynical than profoundly paradoxical that Adams had affirmed 'that no man, even at sixty, had ever been known to attain knowledge; but that a very few were believed to have attained ignorance, which was in result the same'.<sup>2</sup> Even this announced pursuit of ignorance was glossed over as too intellectually embarrassing for oncoming generations. In 'A Letter to American Teachers of History', which he distributed in 1910, reiterating the common human ignorance, he hints at whatever he can find of hope in this situation:

'Man had always flattered himself that he knew—or was about to know—something that would make his own energy intelligible to itself, but he invariably found, on further inquiry, that the more he knew, the less he understood. Vital energy was, perhaps, an intensity;—so, at least, he vaguely hoped;—he knew nothing at all!'<sup>3</sup>

We shall have occasion to explore later the significance of this energy or intensity for the pattern of Adams' scepticism.

His belated venture into the study of psychology convinced him that in the human mind chaos rather than a balanced unity is the normal condition (if not the key to fundamental truth) and that anything more orderly is painfully acquired and hence artificial. The high point (or perhaps the nadir) of his chapter

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

<sup>3</sup> *Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, p. 145.

'The Abyss of Ignorance' is the sentence in which he characterizes even the best organized of men as 'an acrobat, with a dwarf on his back, crossing a chasm on a slack-rope, and commonly breaking his neck'<sup>1</sup> If Adams had had the courage to take seriously his most brilliant sentences (such as this one), perhaps he could have fashioned an education out of these outcroppings of his unconscious.

## II

When he sat down to look over his life and write *The Education*, he was deeply aware not only of the cloud of ignorance in which his boyhood had been spent but also of the alternating phases which constituted its dualisms. Linking his spiritual milieu with the New England climate, Adams concludes that 'the double exterior nature gave life its relative values. Winter and summer, cold and heat, town and country, force and freedom, marked two modes of life and thought, balanced like lobes of the brain.'<sup>2</sup> Here is the authentic double vision which always characterizes the sceptic way of thought, no matter what the next turning may be. In the perspective of sixty years of living, these dual forces had taken on for Adams an almost mystical quality, and he begins *The Education* as if he were going to make of their counterpoint the basis of a musical motif which should draw all the forces of his life into an intelligible pattern.

'The bearing of the two seasons on the education of Henry Adams was no fancy; it was the most decisive force he ever knew; it ran through life, and made the division between its perplexing, warring, irreconcilable problems, irreducible opposites, with growing emphasis to the last year of study. From earliest childhood the boy was accustomed to feel that, for him, life was double.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Education*, p. 434

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Not the least significant of these dualisms was that between Quincy, representing his Adams heritage, and Boston's State Street, representing the Brooks heritage; and there slowly spread from this dualism to the others the insidious canker of hostility, with the result that an unnecessary choice was continually being demanded. 'Winter and summer, town and country, law and liberty, were hostile, and the man who pretended they were not, was in his eyes a schoolmaster—that is, a man employed to tell lies to little boys.'<sup>1</sup> If Adams had ever tried to recognize at once both the hostility and the compatibility of his opposites, this experience would have launched him further than any other in the direction of creative or life-forwarding scepticism, indeed would have propelled him into the crucial phase of paradox, from which he might not have been able easily to retreat. Like Jacob, he might then have fought with the angel and legitimately demanded a blessing.

Once in each of his two major books Adams almost glimpsed this outcome as a possibility, and in each case he was envisioning a dynamic resolution of the clash of opposites. In *Mont-Saint-Michel* he is identifying the round arch and the pointed arch of Gothic cathedrals with faith and reason respectively. The architecture of Western Europe between 1140 and 1200, when the doors and windows of sacred buildings often enjoyed round or roundish upper parts surmounted by pointed caps, he denominates 'transitional' and goes on to justify his employing this much abused word by defending the transition as 'the equilibrium between the love of God—which is faith—and the logic of God—which is reason; between the round arch and the pointed'.<sup>2</sup> As an art historian he knows which arch finally triumphed, yet for a fleeting instant he cannot but admire not the round arch but the moment itself of uncertainty. 'One may not be sure which pleases most, but one need not be harsh toward people who think that the moment of balance is exquisite'.<sup>3</sup> Chartres he points to as 'the last and highest moment where, in 1200, the charm depends on

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*<sup>2</sup> *Mont-Saint-Michel*, p. 321.<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the constant doubt whether emotion or science is uppermost'.<sup>1</sup> Scholastic science, of course, like the pointed arch, was to triumph for a time, but the wistfulness of Adams' hesitancy over this moment of equilibrium shows that he might, under other circumstances, have begun to speculate on whether the pendulum at its perpendicular had not reached the meridian of truth on its way from one extreme to the other. He, however, would not have used the figure of a pendulum but rather that of his encumbered 'acrobat' maintaining a precarious balance on that point of the slack rope which dipped over the deepest chasm of the abyss.

Similar in tone to Adams' appreciation of equilibrium is the description he gives in the first chapter of his autobiography of the aim of all intellectual disciplines and therefore the aim of that education which he was forever catching sight of and then losing again.

'From cradle to grave this problem of running order through chaos, direction through space, discipline through freedom, unity through multiplicity, has always been, and must always be, the task of education, as it is the moral of religion, philosophy, science, art, politics, and economy . . .'.<sup>2</sup>

The force of the repeated preposition here is to give movement to the sets of dualisms and to maintain a constant vibration between the poles instead of allowing one to outpull the other. Adams, however, cannot rest satisfied with this shimmering polarity and implies that the time will come when order shall have been run through chaos, direction through space, discipline through freedom, unity through multiplicity, and hence the duality of the world will have disappeared, not through the achievement of equilibrium but by the extermination of one half the forces by the other half. The reader often has the feeling that this is the kind of unity Adams is consciously seeking although his unconscious is pulling him in the direction of something more paradoxical and intuitive.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Education*, p. 12.

When, later in the story, he is trying to convince himself that unity of some kind has been affirmed or assumed by 'every philosopher, whether sane or insane', he concludes that 'the utmost flight of anarchy seemed to have stopped with the assertion of two principles, and even these fitted into each other, like good and evil, light and darkness'.<sup>1</sup> Here, looked at from another angle, the dualisms of the world do not perpetually vibrate in creative polarity, nor does one half of each dualism obliterate the other; they actually fit together like yang and yin.

Light is thrown on the possible symbolic implications of Adams' concept of duality when in *Mont-Saint-Michel* he describes the Middle Ages as having assigned to the Virgin Mary the role of representing duality, which was unattributable to either Father or Son, for they must in the nature of things represent eternal Oneness. 'The Mother alone was human, imperfect, and could love; she alone was Favour, Duality, Diversity . . . the Mother alone could represent . . . whatever was irregular, exceptional, outlawed; and this was the whole human race.'<sup>2</sup> If, perhaps, Adams had taken as his goal the elaboration and exemplification of some ideal at whose core was the concept of humanity (since this was naturally and intimately related to the duality symbolized by the Virgin), instead of the abstraction 'unity', *The Education* might have centred about a very different theme and might have arrived at a more heartening because more open-ended conclusion.

The most persistent of the dualisms which plagued Adams and the one to which from every diverse line of speculation he always returned was that of unity and multiplicity. Exploration of what he did with this dualism will prepare us for his flirtation with contradictions, for his obvious understanding of and sympathy with scepticism, and finally for his instinctive insistence upon energy, whether expressed in the Virgin or the dynamo, as somehow the irrational and unforeseen heart of that truth which he was forever seeking when he tried to educate himself and others.

One of Adams' approaches to unity and multiplicity was by

<sup>2</sup> *Mont-Saint-Michel*, p. 263.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 432.

way of a flip-of-the-coin attitude, which assumed that a choice had to be made between them. His trenchant criticism of his brother's *Civilization and Decay* centred about the fact that Brooks Adams had 'got nowhere' because he had only stated that man had failed, not explained why such failure was inevitable.

"To leave human development where you do is hardly satisfactory nor is it surely scientific history. If there be a God and a consequent unity, man should confess him. Then indeed he may have a chance of steady advancement toward perfection. But, if there can be no unity and on the contrary only multiplicity, he can only develop into that chaos of which he forms a part."<sup>1</sup>

It is evident that at this point in his thinking, Henry was facing what seemed the inescapable fact that multiplicity would have the last word. Unity, he came to believe, at least unity as the world had previously known it, was scarcely recoverable in a world which equated matter with motion and which had near the end of the nineteenth century witnessed the Curies' discovery of radium. This event, he felt, with remarkable insight, had snapped the continuity with previous human history.

"The child born in 1900 would, then, be born into a new world which would not be a unity but a multiple. Adams tried to imagine it, and an education that would fit it. He found himself in a land where no one had ever penetrated before; where order was an accidental relation obnoxious to nature; artificial compulsion imposed on motion; against which every free energy of the universe revolted; and which, being merely occasional, resolved itself back into anarchy at last."<sup>2</sup>

With another side of his temperament Adams leaned toward the possibility that perhaps it was not obligatory to make a choice. He had precedent for such a seeming solution in the action of both

<sup>1</sup> Brooks Adams, 'The Heritage of Henry Adams' in *Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> *The Education*, pp. 457-8.

science and the church. In pointing out the persistence into the twentieth century of the philosophical problems which plagued Abelard, Adams says,

'Time has settled few or none of the essential points of dispute. Science hesitates, more visibly than the Church ever did, to decide once for all whether unity or diversity is the ultimate law; whether order or chaos is the governing rule of the universe, if universe there is; whether anything, except phenomena, exists.'<sup>1</sup>

That in neither case does this indecision have its roots in intellectual cowardice or philosophical impotence is made clear by Adams' speculation that while both church and state in the thirteenth century were committed to the dogma that good (order, law, and unity) represented the ultimate truth as opposed to evil (disorder, anarchy, multiplicity), the church saw also that evil might result from an excess of good as well as from the absence of good. This recognition kept the church from throwing its weight easily to the side of unity as opposed to multiplicity. The inexplicable and paradoxical relationship of good to evil served as the brake. The two might not simply fit into a perfect yin-yang sphere. On the other hand, Adams discovered, when he reread the history of Western philosophy from the Greeks through Descartes and Schopenhauer in order to ask what unity meant, that in spite of the diversity of the philosophers' systems, none of them had ever denied unity—no matter how varied their conceptions of it. The attempt had often been made to bridge the gap to multiplicity—as for example when medieval philosophers explained the concept of the Trinity as illustrative of the process whereby 'unity could produce diversity'.<sup>2</sup> This found its human analogue in the relationship of mother, father, and child, as the Egyptians and later the Muslim theologians recognized. The attempt of churchmen to identify the Holy Ghost with the Mother kept threatening the philosophical tidiness of the trinitarian concept—Mary, as we have seen, being associated with duality.

<sup>1</sup> *Mont-Saint-Michel*, p. 291.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.



Realism, nominalism, and conceptualism were unsuccessful attempts to bridge the unity-multiplicity chasm and so to solve 'the oldest problem of philosophy, religion, and science'. Adams concludes that 'the flimsiest bridge of all is the human concept, unless somewhere, within or beyond it, an energy not individual is hidden; and in that case the old question instantly reappears: What is energy?'<sup>1</sup> The answer to this question, if he had lived to elaborate it, would perhaps have caught up into itself many of the half-insights with which his writing is studded—particularly the one at the end of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, where he again asserts that

'Modern science, like modern art, tends, in practice to drop the dogma of organic unity. . . . Unity turned itself into complexity, multiplicity, variety, and even contradiction. All experience, human and divine, assured man in the thirteenth century that the lines of the universe converged. How was he to know that these lines ran in every conceivable and inconceivable direction, and that at least half of them seemed to diverge from any imaginable centre of unity! . . . A straight line, or a combination of straight lines, may have still a sort of artistic unity, but what can be done in art with a series of negative symbols?'<sup>2</sup>

The search for that 'imaginable centre' might have been speeded if somehow Adams could have wrenched himself free from his mathematical and scientific bent of mind (a heritage from his eighteenth-century education) to make use of symbols more closely associated with the duality of the Mother or with the Hindu technique of defining God by reiterating '*Neti, neti* (not this, not that)'. 'A series of negative symbols' might have proved very helpful here, even though their pictorial representation has not yet been successfully achieved by mid-twentieth-century artists under the threat of the bomb, which Adams called 'a powerful persuader'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>3</sup> *The Education*, p. 431.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

One of the most productive of Adams' many insights into the history of thought is contained in his chapter on 'The Mystics' in *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*. There he draws a parallel between twelfth- and seventeenth-century thought and shows that the later philosophical conundrums had been already posed and wrestled with by the twelfth century in an attempt to connect unity and multiplicity. Descartes with his *Cogito* would not have startled these thinkers of five centuries before. He would merely have reminded them of Augustine and of their perpetually unresolved dilemma. The similar styles of the two centuries Adams takes as a sign that the same convulsions were again wracking the spirits of men. The despair of seventeenth-century Pascal was grounded in the paradox that reason must lead to the denial of reason if God is to be approached. God had left both too much and too little evidence of Himself in nature. It is to Adams' credit that he somehow saw both Pascal and 'the Western Christian' in the twelfth century touching God 'behind the veil of scepticism'<sup>1</sup> and relying for strength upon the Virgin, who cared only for her child and not for reason or logic. 'In the bankruptcy of reason, she alone was real.'<sup>2</sup> Out of such contradictions, not merely charted but enhanced, and out of the resultant launching forth into a kind of meta-intellectual living, whose energy was symbolized for him by both the Virgin and the dynamo, it might have been possible for Henry Adams to forge not an answer to his educational problems but a way of living which would in itself have dramatized his answer. In exploring the 'might-have-been' let us look in two directions: first, toward his treatment of contradiction and paradox and second, toward his intimations that energy and force and dynamism held, somehow, the key to education in the broad sense in which he conceived of it.

## III

There is no more convincing proof of the self-confessed eighteenth-century temper of Adams' mind than the way in

<sup>1</sup> *Mont-Saint-Michel*, p. 325.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

which he reacts to the presence of contradictions, not only in the realm of the intellect but also in the basic structure of history, the day-to-day events which it is the historian's responsibility to set down and from which he hopes to extract some meaning. Henry was no better prepared than his grandfather for the paradoxical and the absurd. If we remember Dr Johnson's condescension toward the metaphysical quality of seventeenth-century poetry, towards it stubborn and shocking juxtaposing of opposites, we shall have an analogue to the position of both grandfather and grandson. Brooks Adams, we remember, had described his grandfather's conviction that the Creator's scientific laws are understandable and adaptable by men. The events of American history, however, in which John Quincy Adams played such a crucial role, continually disappointed him until, after his defeat in 1828, he 'ceased to believe that God supported him, nor could nor ever did reconcile himself to the destiny which this betrayal by God entailed on the world'.<sup>1</sup> Although Henry Adams was a bit more subtle than his grandfather, probably because he was more confused, he too maintained as a base line the assumption that the world ought to make recognizable sense. In trying to present the Virgin of Chartres sympathetically, he finds it necessary to make excuses for the absurdity of Mary's having gradually absorbed the other two members of the Trinity by asserting, 'All theology and all philosophy are full of contradictions quite as flagrant and far less sympathetic'.<sup>2</sup> His heart is on the side of the Virgin, but he must continually remind himself of the contradictions which she shares with 'all theology and all philosophy', and it is difficult to persuade himself that these do not matter or that they perhaps point the way toward another pattern than the one he had taken for granted.

This intellectual stance is intimately related to the dilemma with which Adams saw himself faced as a teacher of history. 'In essence incoherent and immoral, history either had to be taught as such—or falsified'.<sup>3</sup> Here, too, there is no recognition that

<sup>1</sup> Brooks Adams, 'The Heritage of Henry Adams' in *Degradation of Democratic Dogma*, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Mont-Saint-Michel*, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> *Education*, p. 301.

perhaps the historian's standards of coherence or morality may be in need of modification. As a boy he neglected to ask his father how to deal with the moral problem that deduced 'George Washington from the sum of all wickedness' represented by slavery. 'In practice such trifles as contradictions in principles are easily set aside; the faculty of ignoring them makes the practical man; but any attempt to deal with them seriously as education is fatal.'<sup>1</sup> The attempt, we assume, would be to reconcile rationally the evil inherent in the world, in this case manifesting itself in human slavery, with the presence of a moral hero such as Washington. One event of Adams' life which he felt had yielded him a rare lesson was his meeting with Garibaldi, but the lesson (which he said he might have learned from a glow worm) boiled down to 'the extreme complexity of extreme simplicity'<sup>2</sup>—a conclusion touched with the fatality of all contradictions. His brother Brooks, who seemed to have more of a flair for paradox than Henry, 'found that no paradox compared with that of daily events. The facts were constantly outrunning his thoughts.'<sup>3</sup> Brooks' conclusion interested Henry, and he 'made a note of it for study', but he never once seems to have been tempted to try to fashion his own education on this ineluctable base. To be sure, Adams envisaged as a teaching device at Harvard, to insure intellectual conflict and competition, the assignment to each class of two professors of opposite views.

'Nothing short of this would ever interest either the professor or the student; but of all university freaks, no irregularity shocked the intellectual atmosphere so much as contradiction or competition between teachers. In that respect the thirteenth-century university system was worth the whole teaching of the modern school.'<sup>4</sup>

Whenever Adams falls back upon the superiority of the twelfth or thirteenth century to the nineteenth, he seems to relax, as if he

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

had said the last word, instead of trying to discover in what this superiority consisted. When early twentieth-century science itself bore in upon Adams the necessity of consciously admitting contradictions and even making use of contradictory theories (as he had previously envisaged God Himself wanting contradictory things—represented by the strivings of St Francis and the Schoolmen<sup>1</sup>), he concluded, at least intellectually, that 'evidently the new American would need to think in contradictions, and instead of Kant's famous four antinomies, the new universe would know no law that could not be proved by its anti-law'.<sup>2</sup> He saw a new phase being entered after unbroken movement over seven centuries.

'As though thought were common salt in indefinite solution it must enter a new phase subject to new laws. Thus far, since five or ten thousand years, the mind had successfully reacted, and nothing yet proved that it would fail to react—but it would need to jump.'<sup>3</sup>

## IV

The ultimate aspect of scepticism Adams exemplified, but he could not self-consciously relate it to the other aspects—nescience dualism, and contradiction—in order to perceive a pattern. It arises from an experience of the impotence of words to express the truth which lies beyond paradox and contradiction. To be sure, Adams had only grudgingly admitted the presence of contradictions and always as the frustrating dead-end of his line of reasoning. The fact that with respect to this final phase he made such an important place in his painfully evolving system for dynamism and its embodiment in the Virgin is evidence that he could have used it to crown the nescience which he never outgrew and the polarity which, so long as there was unity and multiplicity in the world, he could never abandon. When in 'The Rule of Phase as Applied to History' Adams is seeking a reason why the Renais-

<sup>1</sup> *Mont-Saint-Michel*, p. 343.

<sup>2</sup> *The Education*, p. 498.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

sance did not break upon the Western world earlier, he marvels at how often during the 'Religious Phase' the world was on the verge of a Renaissance without ever achieving it.

'Notoriously, during this enormously long Religious Phase, the critical point seemed to be touched again and again,—by Greeks and Romans, in Athens, Alexandria, and Constantinople, long before it was finally passed in 1600. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

The same *gestalt* could be applied to Adams' own development with respect to the kind of scepticism which might have given him a sense of calm and release.

Not only in the Latin pun of *The Education's* last chapter heading ('*Nunc Age*') but also in 'The Dynamo and the Virgin' and in 'The Dynamic Theory of History' he revealed that energy, movement, force, action (whether in history or in physics) were coming to represent for him the way to truth. The force of Venus or the Virgin was undeniable, yet so was that of radium. The opposition of the two kinds of force constituted for Adams a problem in dynamics, and his 'The Rule of Phase as Applied to History' was a brave thrust in the direction of applying the most up-to-date science to the conundrum of history. At the time Adams was helping Sir Charles Lyell assemble evidence of evolution in support of Darwinism, he knew that, unlike the Darwinians, he was not bound to Natural Selection as a substitute for the Athanasian Creed and that he was not even bound to 'the idea of one Form, Law, Order, or Sequence' as opposed to none, 'that what he valued most was Motion, and that what attracted his mind was Change'.<sup>2</sup> He followed the world's great philosophers as they tried to detect or construct a verifiable unity under the continual shadow of the apparent axiom that 'Mind and Unity flourished or perished together'.<sup>3</sup> Mindful of Socrates' distrust of logic, he was not at all sure that he could escape from the philosophical labyrinths where generations of scholars had remained 'pursuing

<sup>1</sup> *Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, p. 290.

<sup>2</sup> *The Education*, p. 231.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429.

ignorance in silence, in company with the most famous teachers of all time. Not one of them had ever found a logical highroad of escape.<sup>1</sup> Whatever his end, however, he felt he must press on, even to the point of denying unity, embracing multiplicity, and fashioning himself a new education to cope with this radical shift of base.

When he came to setting down practical prescriptions concerning the educational process, it was only natural that he should stress giving the student, who was himself a form of energy, the tools with which he could learn, teaching him how to react to experience with vigour and economy and to keep on reacting in order that haply he might overcome 'the friction or the viscosity of inertia; . . . they know enough who know how to learn.'<sup>2</sup>

It is not surprising that Adams should have chosen the dynamo as the most fascinating and significant symbol of the twentieth-century world into which he had finally moved before he was seventy, the world for which he had been desperately trying to educate himself all his life, with an almost unique awareness of his own disabilities and those of his generation. As he followed contemporary science to the point where, as he understood its implications, the ether became almost equatable with thought, it is little wonder that he saw the mysterious dynamo as 'a symbol of infinity, . . . a moral force'.<sup>3</sup> His friend Langley, who, as a pioneer in the development of the airplane, seemed intellectually prepared for any eventuality—'physics stark mad in metaphysics'<sup>4</sup>—nevertheless shuddered before 'the new rays, that were little short of parricidal in their wicked spirit toward science. . . . Radium denied its God—or, what was to Langley the same thing, denied the truths in his Science.'<sup>5</sup> All these rays were, to Adams, 'a revelation of mysterious energy like that of the cross; they were what, in terms of medieval science, were called immediate modes of the divine substance'.<sup>6</sup>

If energy were to be defined as what produces work, then

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383.

Adams felt growing within him a new kind of pragmatism, based in part on his nostalgic appreciation of the magnificent philosophical and artistic unity of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and of its motive force, the Virgin. Since there was no likelihood at all of this insight taking the form of a Newman-return to Rome, Adams was free to appreciate the force of *das ewige Weibliche* in Diana of the Ephesians, in Aphrodite, and in the Indian goddesses, who were the shaktis or female energy of the gods. It is not by accident that Hazard, a character in *Esther*, had travelled in Asia and had in his library an elaborate collection of illustrated works on art—Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Medieval, Mexican, Japanese, Indian. The problem which kept Adams continually agitated was that he dared not deny either the transforming energy of these goddesses or that of the dynamo or of radium. It was a hard-won truth of his personal life which he could not deny that 'no woman had ever driven him wrong; no man had ever driven him right'.<sup>1</sup> Is it any wonder that the Virgin of Amiens struck him as 'a channel of force'<sup>2</sup> and that in whatever direction true education lay, Adams was sure that it must concern itself with reading the riddle of force, whether in dynamo or in Virgin? Insights like these were finally cutting Adams off from his eighteenth-century expectations that perhaps he would one day turn a bend in the road and discover, already packaged, the education he was seeking. Education, or truth, he finally knew would be something dynamic and quite beyond the commonly accepted categories of the mind; hence it would find its expression far beyond the realm of words which could be easily passed along from teacher to student.

## v

From this vantage point let us take a last look at Adams' central problem. His justification for writing *The Education* was that 'everyone must bear his own universe, and most persons are moderately interested in learning how their neighbors have

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.



managed to carry theirs'.<sup>1</sup> The shape of Adams' peculiar universe manifested itself before he was ten years old, when he was faced 'with a dilemma that might have puzzled an early Christian. What was he?—where was he going?'<sup>2</sup> Intellectually dogged to the end, after he had surveyed as a historian the failure of the Christian unity centring in the Virgin and the pointing of most scientific thinking towards meaningless motion, he was resolved not to abandon the burden of his universe, not to admit defeat.

'As long as he could whisper, he would go on as he had begun, bluntly refusing to meet his creator with the admission that the creation had taught him nothing except that the square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle might for convenience be taken as equal to something else. Every man with self-respect enough to become effective, if only as a machine, has had to account to himself for himself somehow, and to invent a formula of his own for his universe, if the standard formulas failed. There, whether finished or not, education stopped. The formula, once made, could but be verified.'<sup>3</sup>

The formula turned out to be his 'Dynamic Theory of History', which, although it served him as 'a spool on which to wind the thread of history without breaking it', did not impress his fellow historians as a satisfactory answer. In a way, Adams too recognized it was unsatisfactory, but what the venture taught him perhaps was that the process itself of deriving formulae may be the only activity which can absorb all man's energies and give him a sense of well-being. In another mood, Adams had lamented early in his autobiography that he 'never got to the point of playing the game at all; he lost himself in the study of it, watching the errors of the players'.<sup>4</sup> Social pressure demanded that one play the game, that one find the answers. The fact that Adams, in spite of the protests of failure which he felt were expected of him, concluded that in comparison with his fellows he had perhaps earned

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 472.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

something more precious than education is a significant clue to the nature of his scepticism. As early as 1894 he had looked at King and Whitney, who had started with him from Harvard forty years earlier, the one now a physical and financial failure, the other a financial success, and decided that 'For anything Adams could see he was himself as contented as though he had been educated'.<sup>1</sup> He was still convinced, as he had been in 1854, that expertise in the use of four tools (mathematics, French, German, and Spanish) was all he needed to compete with his fellows. Adams' contentment was not at having arrived but at having set his feet on what he felt was the right path.

Let us ask ourselves the question, then, to what extent Adams belongs by temperament and training to the sceptic tradition. We have seen his immersion in nescience and his struggle to the end with dualisms, principally that of unity and multiplicity. That he shied away from paradox and contradiction, once he had pointed them out, probably argues that he saw no creative use he could make of them—a use which would have needed to be 'tenon'd and mortis'd' in a more granite-like conviction than he possessed of the possibility that action, energy, the living of life contained in itself the education and the truth he was seeking. Perhaps it was the rationalistic vigour of both his eighteenth-century training and the Darwinism of his manhood which stood in the way of his true appreciation of both the paradoxical and the irrational or instinctive. It is significant in this connection that Darwin, having rejected poetry in his youth, found that in maturity he was unable to appreciate it and that Adams would not read Wordsworth as a boy (preferring eighteenth-century poets) and 'discovered' him only after the age of thirty.

Another stumbling-block in the way of Adams' scepticism may have been the remnants of Puritanism which he admitted gave his mind a dogmatic bent.

'Resistance to something was the law of New England nature; the boy looked out on the world with the instinct of resistance; for

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

numberless generations his predecessors had viewed the world chiefly as a thing to be reformed, filled with evil forces to be abolished, and they saw no reason to suppose that they had wholly succeeded in the abolition; the duty was unchanged. That duty implied not only resistance to evil, but hatred of it.<sup>1</sup>

The habit of violently resisting evil would imply, on the one hand, nothing at all of the Pyrrhonian *isothernia* which stands marvelling before the myriad dualisms of the world—marvelling without being able to take decisive action, as the strenuous Western culture of the nineteenth century would point out. There were, to be sure, many of the elements of scepticism in Puritan thought, but by the time it had crossed to America and filtered down to the mid-nineteenth century, the residue was composed largely of 'inherited dogma and *a priori* thought'.<sup>2</sup> The slavery issue in this period of crisis galvanized into action all the latent Puritanism of even the rational and unexcitable Adamses. In fact, it probably provided an outlet for pent-up emotions of whose presence they had been unaware.

The pull of Henry's temperament, however, was in another direction, and he spoke from the depths of his soul when he said,

'No man, however strong, can serve ten years as schoolmaster, priest, or Senator, and remain fit for anything else. All the dogmatic stations in life have the effect of fixing a certain stiffness of attitude forever, as though they mesmerized the subject.'<sup>3</sup>

It was the aim of Adams' existence to escape the influence of such mesmerism, yet at the same time he was convinced that he ought to get ahead in his century and make a contribution comparable to that of previous Adamses. Unwilling to waste more time flitting from one intellectual position to another, Adams while still in England resolved to put all his Hamletisms behind him and to be up and doing.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

'To him, the current of his time was to be his current, lead where it might. He put psychology under lock and key; he insisted on maintaining his absolute standards; on aiming at ultimate Unity. The mania for handling all sides of every question, looking into every window, and opening every door, was, as Bluebeard judiciously pointed out to his wives, fatal to their practical usefulness in society. One could not stop to chase doubts as though they were rabbits. One had no time to paint and putty the surface of Law, even though it were cracked and rotten. For the young men whose lives were cast in the generation between 1867 and 1900, Law should be Evolution from lower to higher, aggregation of the atom in the mass, concentration of multiplicity in unity, compulsion of anarchy in order; and he would force himself to follow wherever it led, though he should sacrifice five thousand millions more in money, and a million more lives.'<sup>1</sup>

Brave words like these, though they must have relieved his despairing father and indeed one side of his own nature, contain the answer to the question of Adams' uneasy scepticism. Darwinism had merely reinforced perhaps the only element shared by Puritanism and eighteenth-century rationalism—the rigidity into which a dying nescience was always threatening to transform itself. To this it had added the concept of evolution from lower to higher, and the result was to block the nascent scepticism of Henry Adams, or at least to divert it. The fact that Adams' unconscious drove him relentlessly in the direction of the dynamo, whose fascination he could not explain, was an unplanned protest against this conception of unlimited progress in a straight line, with no twistings and turnings and, above all, no circles or cycles.

Evidence of his unacknowledged commitment to the circular is, however, to be found in 'Buddha and Brahma', the poem which he wrote after meditating with LaFarge under a Bo-tree in Anuradhapura, Ceylon. Its thesis is the equal acceptability of the active and the contemplative roads to Brahma.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

## Thought

Travelling in constant circles, round and round,  
Must ever pass through endless contradictions,  
Returning on itself at last, till lost  
In silence.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the reason 'futilitarian silence' exerted such a fascination over Adams was that he felt within it this seed of life.

In the meantime, he had no fear of identifying scepticism wherever he found it, even in the thinking of the avowedly religious, where it supposedly had no place. He lightly touches on the workmen of Chartres and Chrétien de Troyes; whose scepticism was as childlike as faith.<sup>2</sup> Later, discussing Bernard of Clairvaux, he says:

'In every age man has been apt to dream uneasily, rolling from side to side, beating against imaginary bars, unless, tired out, he has sunk into indifference or scepticism. Religious minds prefer scepticism. The true saint is a profound sceptic; a total disbeliever in human reason, who has more than once joined hands on this ground with some who were at best sinners. Bernard was a total disbeliever in scholasticism; so was Voltaire.'<sup>3</sup>

John of Salisbury, balancing Abelard and the schools against Bernard, chose the latter as representative of a 'mild scepticism in faith'.

"I prefer to doubt," he [John] said, "rather than rashly define what is hidden." The battle with the schools had then resulted only in creating three kinds of sceptics:—the disbelievers in human reason; the passive agnostics; and the sceptics proper, who would have been atheists had they dared.<sup>4</sup>

One has the feeling that Adams was not being the mere historian here, but that he saw the possibility for himself of all three posi-

<sup>1</sup> *Yale Review* (Oct. 1915), 5:87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>3</sup> *Mont-Saint-Michel*, p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

tions. Pascal he recognized as unconsciously sceptical when he insisted that it required more than reason in order to reach God. The twelfth-century Western Christian, like Pascal, 'touched God behind the veil of scepticism'.<sup>1</sup> Rhetoric and reason had been linked together so indissolubly by the schoolmen that such diverse critics as Francis of Assisi and Bacon momentarily pitched their tents in the same camp.

'One sees instantly that neither Francis of Assisi nor Bacon of Verulam could have hoped for peace with the schools; twelfth-century ecstasy felt the futility of mere rhetoric quite as keenly as seventeenth-century scepticism was to feel it. . . .'<sup>2</sup>

Here again had Adams taken one turning with Bacon rather than another, he might have reaped the fruits of truly creative doubt.

Instead, he alighted (in so far as he did alight) upon a kind of historical formula which has both the merits and the defects of its origins but whose lasting value is perhaps that it provokes us into continuing speculative sorties. In 'The Rule of Phase as Applied to History', he sees the similarities between a comet and thought, just as he had seen those between the dynamo and the Virgin. In progressing up the scale of phases, according to the schema of William Gibbs, he moves from solids to fluid, to vapour, to the electron, and to ether, where he pauses before he goes on to the phases of space and hyper-space. What attracts him to ether is that it is 'endowed with qualities which are not so much substantial or material as they are concepts of thought—self-contradictions in experience . . . it [ether] now forms the foundation of physics, and in it both mind and matter merge'.<sup>3</sup> For the twentieth-century sceptic this is as useful as Descartes' 'animal spirits' proved in the seventeenth century. Each provided the indispensable bridge between mind and matter, throughout the history of scepticism perhaps the most fundamental of all dualisms.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>3</sup> *Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, p. 269.

One of the jumps which Adams felt the late nineteenth-century mind had been forced to make was from mechanical to electromagnetic thought, which consisted of 'the familiar use of formulas carrying indefinite self-contradiction into the conception of force'.<sup>1</sup> Force and experience mark but that ultimate aspect of scepticism presided over by the Virgin or the dynamo, and self-contradiction is its necessary prelude. It is possible somehow for the eternal alchemy of God to transform self-contradiction into equilibrium. Adams compares man's thought to water and seeks out its phases.

'This solvent, then,—this ultimate motion which absorbs all other forms of motion is an ultimate equilibrium,—this ethereal current of Thought,—is conceived as existing, like ice on a mountain range, and trickling from every pore of rock, in innumerable rills; uniting always into larger channels, and always dissolving whatever it meets, until at last it reaches equilibrium in the ocean of ultimate solution.'<sup>2</sup>

One can imagine Emerson, if he had lived as long as Adams, seizing upon just this kind of analogy (representing the acrobat on his rope, seen from another angle) to make vivid the relation of man to the Oversoul, of the Atman to Brahman. Indeed, Adams made explicit at least once his own conception of Brahma in words which he gave to the Rajah of Mogadha in 'Buddha and Brahma':

For me this meaning  
Points back and forward to that common goal  
From which all paths diverge; to which  
All paths must tend—Brahma, the only truth!<sup>3</sup>

One wonders whether the connection with Emerson ever crossed Adams' mind and whether, if it did, he was amused or horrified. A few paragraphs farther along in the chapter called 'The Rule of Phase' Adams finally has by the tail that abstract truth which

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>3</sup> *Yale Review*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

Strong had insisted would bring with it 'our religion and our immortality'.

'In this long and—for our purposes—infinite stretch of time, the substance called Thought has,—like the substance called water or gas,—passed through a variety of phases, or changes, or states of equilibrium, with which we are all, more or less, familiar. We live in a world of phases, so much more astonishing than the explosion of rockets, that we cannot, unless we are Gibbs or Watts, stop every moment to ask what becomes of the salt we put in our soup, or the water we boil in our teapot, and we are apt to remain stupidly stolid when a bulb bursts into a tulip, or a worm turns into a butterfly. No phase compares in wonder with the mere fact of our own existence, and this wonder has so completely exhausted the powers of Thought that mankind, except in a few laboratories, has ceased to wonder, or even to think. The Egyptians had infinite reason to bow down before a beetle; we have as much reason as they, for we know no more about it; but we have learned to accept our beetle Phase, and to recognize that everything, animate or inanimate, spiritual or material, exists in Phase; that all is equilibrium more or less unstable, and that our whole vision is limited to the bare possibility of calculating in mathematical form the degree of a given instability.'<sup>1</sup>

Here are all the elements of a truly creative scepticism blended for once into a manageable and yet an infinitely expandable pattern. It might have required at least ten more years (if Adams could have counted on escaping Struldbuggian senescence) for him to set this insight to work.

<sup>1</sup> *Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, pp. 277-8.



## XI

# EXISTENTIALISM: SUSPENSION BRIDGE TO INDIAN THOUGHT



### I

ONE of the most prolific sources of the West's tragic misunderstanding of the East, at the philosophical level, has always been the Orient's uncompromising championship of a point of view which issues in such concepts as *nirvana*, *moksha*, and *maya*. Because of what Western thinkers have usually dismissed as a hopeless temperamental incompatibility, the West, in its intellectual provincialism, has misconceived the goal of Eastern thought as a kind of emptiness or nothingness, called *nirvana*, where the freedom or *moksha* which one achieves is freedom from all desire for those experiences and objects which make up, for the West, the bulk of man's life on earth, and which are held by the incomprehensible Easterners to be merely *maya* or illusion. Western philosophers, with a few notable exceptions, have persistently greeted these concepts, and the thread of seeming negativism on which they are strung, with a kind of metaphysical shiver of horror in the mistaken notion that behind them lies the blank all-whiteness symbolized by Melville in *Moby Dick*. To be sure, this qualitylessness or *nirguna*, always associated with *nirvana*, has scarcely the galvanic appeal to make it a good advertising slogan for Eastern philosophy in the West, but that is because this concept, like the others, is over- rather than under-streamlined. All of them demand that the mind which would grasp them should have worked its way rigorously through preceding stages of spiritual development which the West, until comparatively recently, has been able to disregard in its concern for the factual, the definite, and the rational.

Such misunderstanding is partly the result of the impossibility of equating Sanskrit words easily with those of the modern European languages because of the long history of geographical division and semantic change which separates them. Consequently those who have been most eager to explain these three basic concepts to the West, whether sympathetically or unsympathetically, have not rested their case after equating *maya*, or the recognizable outlines of man's world, with illusion; *moksha*, or the ultimate reward, with freedom from desire; and *nirvana*, or man's goal, with nothingness. The sympathetic expositors have agonized through book after book in an attempt, from every possible angle, to make clear the positive and dynamic nature of these concepts, to explain that *nirvana* does not stand for a complete metaphysical vacuum, that *maya* does not imply the utter repudiation of the senses, and that *moksha* does not mean release from all the life-experience which for most Westerners constitutes the texture of existence. Each term has a more creative core than Western thinkers have been willing to recognize.

In spite of a heroic effort on the part of both Eastern philosophers and their Western friends, not only he who runs without reading but even the more speculative and often those who are experts in such fields as Christian theology have damned Eastern thought, and Indian in particular, with the epithet 'life-denying'. This cliché, born of insufficiently sustained, philosophically immature, and experientially sterile attempts at understanding, has merely exacerbated the intellectual estrangement between the two cultures, each of which actually has within it the resources for a deep appreciation of the other. However, since the Orient would need, as the older culture, to reach impossibly far back into its intellectual history to recover anything comparable to our chief philosophical assumptions, it behooves us to stretch forward in advance of the cutting edge of our own most recent experience and try, if we can, to project ourselves toward a position from which we can follow the Orientals through the kinds of dilemmas from which they have emerged bearing these philosophical fruits. The West's smug exaltation of the 'abundant life' in self-

righteous opposition to 'life-denial' has itself warped an epithet whose content was perhaps once something very like a leading Indian concept into mere cluttered 'busyness', with no pause for contemplation. The very word 'contemplation' itself too often conjures up for the Westerner a self-centred escapism, which eschews the rugged trials of daily life in the world, rather than the act of reaching past these to a vantage point beyond. This obtuseness, in America, has often enough led to a misunderstanding of the very Indian action of her own Henry Thoreau in retiring to Walden Pond to rid his soul of the 'grit' accumulated in years of living at Concord. He has been thoughtlessly condemned for 'escaping' even though he returned to Concord when his mission had been accomplished.

However, just when it had looked as if the East were doomed by Western inexperience and impatience to a kind of philosophical isolation, the West has been forcibly roused from its shadowy solipsism and has turned a speculative corner, which in providing a new perspective may make possible a long overdue basis for comprehension of the East. After centuries of sometimes wilful and sometimes negligent misunderstanding, the moment may have arrived in the world's cultural history when there is a possibility of deep appreciation in the West of Oriental thought.

Having waited this long for the West to acquire a sufficient background of experience to make understanding a little more likely, India, it seems to me, should welcome the good offices of a movement in Western thought which has caught the popular imagination of the literate only in the past ten or fifteen years, although its immediate roots lie far back in the nineteenth century. I refer to the Existentialism which receives its philosophical support from Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers in Germany and has been popularized by Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus in France. There is every likelihood that a grasp by Westerners of the inwardness of this philosophy will enable them to look upon the three concepts mentioned above with more sympathetic and percipient eyes than heretofore. In Existentialism the West has, for almost the first time in its culturally adolescent

experience, come close to the kind of epistemological dilemmas and moral decisions out of which the Indian concepts were, perhaps, first wrought. It is significant, too, for the possibility of understanding between the two cultures that Existentialism is not quite so rigid and schematized as other Western systems and that its immediate connection with moral decisions is more obvious. In an anthology of Existentialist writers<sup>1</sup> we find such literary names as Dostoiévsky, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Rilke alongside those of the more technical professional philosophers. This anthology represents about the same proportion of elaborate system-building to experience-centred philosophy as is to be found in India when one considers Nyaya, Vaishesika, or Carvaka in relation to the finest products of Vedanta, Jainism, Buddhism, etc. Such Indian philosophical classics as the Upanishads and the Gita lie almost wholly within the area where primary philosophical questions are being asked and where answers are being forged from the hard metal of experience. The Vedas and the Mahabharata itself have continually been re-explored for clues to the meaning of existence, and the *Yoga-Vasistha* represents a philosophically sophisticated expansion of the Ramayana. It is the temperamental unwillingness of Indian thought to rest satisfied with the husks of philosophical architectonics which has perennially sent Indian thinkers back not only to the primary philosophical sources but to the storehouses of the great epics and the Puranas for fresh inspiration. It should be heartening, then, to find Indian thinkers with a concern for rapprochement to observe the extent to which modern Existentialism permeates literature as well as philosophy.

To attempt to connect meaningfully two such protean entities as Existentialism and Indian thought appears at first glance to be an impossible task. What follows, therefore, does not pretend to be a definitive comparison,<sup>2</sup> nor does it exclude the possibility of

<sup>1</sup> *Existentialism from Dostoiévsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1956).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. K. Guru Dutt, *Existentialism: A Survey and Ancient Indian Thought* (Bangalore: Indian Institute of Culture, 1953), for a lucid and stimulating treatment of similarities and differences.

viewing the two bodies of material from many other angles and, indeed, from coming to the well substantiated conclusion that they have very little in common. What may be significant, it seems to me, is to make use of some leading concepts of Existentialism in order to point toward an understanding of what have proved heretofore, for Western thinkers, the most uncongenial aspects of Indian thought.

## II

Let us move upon Existentialism, as befits its nature, from the side of ambiguity. The Existentialists are not the only contributors to the history of thought, West or East, to have concerned themselves with ambiguity. But the philosophical investigator cannot but be struck by the frequency with which he meets the term in Existentialist writings and, the more he studies them, by its key position. Indeed, one of the keenest critical comments on Existentialism is that 'All expressions in Existenz-philosophy are ambiguous *in principle*'.<sup>1</sup> Far from indicating a deliberate attempt on the part of Existentialists to confuse the philosophical issues, this conscious espousal of ambiguity argues a deep respect for communication as the centre of the philosophical experience and a concomitant desire both to exalt and to transcend words, which are the building blocks of that communication. Thus the Existentialism of the West takes a first step toward the appreciation of a culture whose classical language represents the precipitate of millennia of experience. It is the reasoned judgment of an old rather than a young culture that 'One word properly defined and used throws open the gates of Heaven to you'. Indian culture, on the one hand, exalts the Logos to a supreme position when it makes of AUM the instigator of creation and at the same time fashions its analysis of creation in such striking paradoxes that the intent could only have been to call attention away from words and out into the realm of uncapturable experience toward which they point. Per-

<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, ed. Wm. Earle (New York, 1960), p. 13 of the introduction.

haps both of these operations are signified by the proper defining and-using of a word.

Let us see how ambiguity operates among the Existentialists and why they support it in principle. In pointing out Kafka's conscious effort to avoid 'one exclusive exegesis', Walter Kaufmann concludes that 'ambiguity is the essence of his art.'<sup>1</sup> After sketching four variants of the Prometheus myth, Kafka wrote in his third notebook: "The myth tries to explain the unexplainable".<sup>2</sup> It is for the sake of truthfulness, concludes the editor, that Kafka will not settle for 'a single explanation . . . a compelling exegesis'.

What is, therefore, the nature of this truthfulness which at the level of common human dialogue requires the use of ambiguity and which will not settle for a single, neatly rounded interpretation? Perhaps material for an answer to this question may be culled from Jaspers' judgment, in *Reason and Existenz*, on the penchant of both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard for oblique expression and the use of masks.

'For them masks necessarily belong to the truth. Indirect communication becomes for them the sole way of communicating genuine truth; indirect communication, as expression, is appropriate to the ambiguity of genuine truth in temporal existence. . . .'<sup>3</sup>

As Jaspers says, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard 'always worked by all possible means to prepare a correct understanding of their work through the ambiguity of what they said.'<sup>4</sup> The resulting unexpected breakdown of simple communication shocks the mind into a recognition that truth is very different in character from what it had been assumed to be and demands a startlingly enlarged conception of communication.

What is suggested thereby about the Existentialist conception of the nature of truth? The above quotations would seem to point to the fact that two distinct realms are conceived by the Existential-

<sup>1</sup> Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

ist: one, the mundane sphere of intellectual activity where rational explanations are simply, if unsatisfactorily, given, where opposites necessarily clash; the other, a realm of Transcendence whose locus for us is determined by the out-thrusts of Existenz and by the inevitable conflict of our partial and incompatible explanations on the lower plane—a realm, in short, where the Real coincides with the essentially unexplainable. Thus any compelling or exclusive exegesis, no matter how attractive it appears, is always inadequate because it cannot compass the unexplainable whole, the whole which dwells apart from and beyond any explanations. This 'genuine truth', when it is made flesh in the realm of temporal existence, will necessarily appear ambiguous because any other form than ambiguity would misrepresent it. Only partial truths are unambiguous.

Karl Jaspers has fashioned with far-reaching insight a most appropriate figure to body forth the above abstraction. He has taken the horizon as a symbol of what he calls the Encompassing.

'As we move toward the horizon in the world of space without ever reaching it, because the horizon moves with us and re-establishes itself ever anew as the Encompassing at each moment, so objective research moves toward totalities at each moment which never become total and real Being, but must be passed through towards new vistas.'<sup>1</sup>

This figure of the Encompassing makes it clear, by analogy, why even the infinite addition of partial explanation to partial explanation can never constitute the whole truth, which is something at once overarching, moving, and limitless. It is as if Jaspers, in line with the notion that each natural phenomenon of the macrocosm has its correspondent spiritual state within the experience of man, the microcosm, had seized upon an obvious but hitherto unutilized experience whose availability for philosophical ends has been steadily increasing through the regencies of the Ptolemaic

<sup>1</sup> Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

and Copernican systems, from the time when man first became aware of movement, whether of sun or earth or both. Indeed, movement is the key word here.

'If God is eternal, still for man truth is as a developing truth, indeed, a truth developing in communication. Abstracted from this as something permanent, truth instead of remaining itself degenerates into determinate knowledge, into a finished contentment instead of a demand that consumes temporal existence.'<sup>1</sup>

The apparent totalities which Jaspers sees being passed through at each moment, the phases of determinate knowledge which must continually be overreached, together make up the ambiguities which are the inevitable garment of 'genuine truth in temporal existence'. If there were in nature such an anomaly as an achievable horizon, then the truth would turn out to be something static, flat, and simple, about which one could safely dogmatize. But 'the horizons are not finite. On all sides we are impelled toward the Infinite'. Being, which manifests itself and yet perpetually eludes our grasp, is 'that which always makes its presence known, which does not appear itself, but from which everything comes to us'.<sup>2</sup> In so far as the Encompassing expresses itself in man, it is 'consciousness in general, spirit, Existenz'<sup>3</sup>—hence, one of the roots of Existentialism. We are reminded, perhaps with shame, of our impossible attempt to seize and render static the present between the past and the future when we hear Jaspers recommending the discovery of truth 'by retrospection and by anticipation'. Again the moving nature of the Encompassing is set forth. It is in support of this insight that the Existentialists cling to their central tenet that man's essence can never be defined until one has penetrated to the meaning of his existence. The dynamic may one day lead men to the transcendent static, but if one begins with the static (which must necessarily be characterized by 'a finished contentment'), he is already lost. This is somewhat reminiscent

<sup>1</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.



of Francis Bacon's thesis in *The Advancement of Learning* that if one begins with doubts, he shall end in certainties, but if he begins with certainties, he shall end in doubts.

The necessary corollary of such Existentialist conceptions as these is that no possible source of truth, no single mode in which the Encompassing incarnates itself can with impunity be overlooked, just as none of these can be rested in as the ultimate truth. Indeed, Jaspers is led to define reason in a peculiarly dramatic and dynamic way as

'the impulses in which we open ourselves without limit, in which we want to give language to everything that is, embrace, as it were, all that is most strange and most distant, seeking a relation with everything, denying communication to nothing.'<sup>1</sup>

This, to be sure, is a large order, but he who could fill it, although he might find himself entangled in ambiguities, would never be guilty of small-minded dogmatism or intolerance. He would continually be touching the hem of the retreating garment of the Encompassing.

We are now in a position to understand what would otherwise seem hopelessly contradictory and paradoxical in Jaspers' conclusion that 'Man can seek the path of his truth in unfanatical absoluteness, in a decisiveness which remains open'.<sup>2</sup> Behind the achievement of competence in this technique is an awareness of how the one inheres in the many and the many in the one—an awareness which all philosophers must ultimately seek to master. Says Jaspers,

'the determinateness of the historical depths is bound up with the openness of unlimited ranges of Being, and the truth of one's own bases with their relation to the ungrounded openness of Being, Existenz with reason.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>2</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

Paradox itself, against this background, is seen as the only reliable insurance against missing some of the essential components of truth, and hence ambiguity becomes not a flaw or an intellectual vagary but a consciously applied principle of action.

If we press behind this self-conscious ambiguity, we shall find a theory of communication which, if rightly understood, thrusts significant arches across time and space in the direction of the Indian concepts we are seeking to understand—*maya*, *moksha*, and *nirvana*. In probing the wisdom of Hölderlin, Martin Heidegger reinforces and elaborates the poet's observation that 'we have been a conversation' by stating that the 'Conversation and its unity support our existence'.<sup>1</sup> For him historical existence is coterminous with the conversation—to some extent the dialectic—which we are because such conversation is the instrument of our seeking and finding an underlying unity. The being of man, grounded in language, becomes actual only in the give and take of conversation, which is an ongoing process.<sup>2</sup> We have heard Jaspers in a similar vein referring to whatever truth man knows as 'a truth developing in communication'.<sup>3</sup> This is necessarily not an ultimate truth, for it is in conversation that the solid foundation of ambiguity is brought to light. As Heidegger says, 'After man has placed himself in the presence of something perpetual [the unity or meeting of minds which conversation demands], then only can he expose himself to the changeable, to that which comes and goes; for only the persistent is changeable.'<sup>4</sup>

Language as 'the supreme event of human existence',<sup>5</sup> moves toward its highest reaches in poetry, which names things into being in much the same way as Adam named the animals in Eden. Because this process is not just one of devising labels for what was already known, but is the prototype of creative activity, poetry is explicitly held by Heidegger to be what it has seemed to many previous thinkers, 'the foundation which supports history',<sup>6</sup> and not something extraneous and ornamental.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, ed. W. Brock (Chicago, 1955), p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

<sup>4</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

As one would expect in thought shot through with ambiguity, speechlessness plays an important part in the Existentialist concept of communication. In the writing of Heidegger, there is a transcendent word which proceeds from Being and has the earmarks of the Logos. It is 'the word of the soundless voice of Being',<sup>1</sup> which man answers speechlessly through his 'thanking' and his subsequent rites of thanksgiving. By such means the Word is stepped down to become 'the source of the human Word which is the prime cause of language as the enunciation of the Word in words'.<sup>2</sup> Not all the language used by men, however, will share this high origin, and when it does not transmit faithfully the Word, it has a hollow sound—like that of the scribes and the Pharisees in contrast with the language of one who 'spoke as having authority'.

'But if it does ring true, then the testimony of the soundless voice of hidden springs lures it ever on, the thought of Being guards the Word and fulfils its function in such guardianship, namely care for the use of language.'<sup>3</sup>

Thus Heidegger enunciates the rationale of the careful use of words. They must forever be tested against the soundless whisperings of Being, which they are destined never to reproduce perfectly—hence, the prime role of ambiguity in attempting to represent what cannot be said directly. The thinker and the poet, says Heidegger, speak out of 'long-guarded speechlessness and the careful clarification of the field thus cleared . . .'.<sup>4</sup> The two of them, poet and thinker, although they have many differences, share a meticulous concern for the word in the hope that it will somehow suggest if it can never fully encompass the Word, from which it receives whatever life it possesses.

Reason, we remember, in Jaspers' conception of it, 'seeks to give language to everything . . . denying communication to nothing'.<sup>5</sup> Hence we might conclude that the reasonable is coter-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>5</sup> *Kaufmann, op. cit.*, p. 150.

minous with what can be put into language, but to accept, let alone be satisfied with, such rationality would be to miss the fine form of truth itself. This, the Existentialists never tire of pointing out, inheres in the very communicative process. 'Abstracted from communication,' Jaspers says, 'truth hardens into an unreality. The movement of communication is at one and the same time the preservation of, and the search for, the truth.'<sup>1</sup> However, it is never the deadly leap of the beast on its prey. This is why it is so difficult to try to elucidate the concepts of an Existential philosophy without slipping into delusion and pretence. It must be admitted at once that our abstractions have almost nothing in common with the situations out of which they sprang. This is adumbrated by Jaspers with remarkable psychological acuity when he says,

'... the truth of existential thought never lies in its content as such, but rather in what happens to me in thinking of it: either in a passion for possibilities which prepares in advance and recalls, or in real communication where what was said comes forth as existentially true in ever unique ways, unplanned, out of the absolute consciousness of love.'<sup>2</sup>

The initial unplannedness of this process (which reflects the boundlessness of the Encompassing) and its termination in the 'absolute consciousness of love' mark it off sharply from the restricted area out of which rationally formed dogmatisms are born. Jaspers insists that the 'radical will-to-communicate' works only when Existenz holds 'itself open before the whole range of possibilities and actualities', whereas to think one already possesses the truth conclusively is to break communication off.<sup>3</sup> It is only in the creative atmosphere of endless give and take, with its continual possibility (or threat) of shift and change and widening, deepening insights, that

'communication seems to produce for the first time that which is communicating: independent natures which come to conscious-

<sup>1</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

ness of themselves, however, as though they were not touched by the contingencies of empirical existence, but had been bound together eternally.’<sup>1</sup>

This is not, as Jaspers explains, the mere rapprochement of two disparate entities consciously deciding to bind themselves together; it is rather the losing of oneself in unconditional communication, which is at once a fulfilment of the self and, as it moves forward, brings into being an amalgam of fulfilled selves. Such fruitful communication is characterized by two kinds of openness: ‘the openness to the knowability of what is not yet known’ and the openness which is

‘ready to encounter the substance of every being that really communicates with me as another who am not, but in solidarity with whom I can without limit will to become myself. This loving search of men reaches no termination’.<sup>2</sup>

All Existentialists, whatever their differences, agree upon the endlessness of this search and warn their hearers against the danger of halting it and so lapsing into congenial dogmatisms. To push ahead into this uncharted openness is a venture to which one is committed by his determination to know himself (and indeed to create himself) upon the ground of his communication. That there is risk in this venture must never be minimized, but it may turn out, and it is the only activity which can turn out, to contain the vital seed of new insights. Jaspers’ paradoxical conclusion about this ever-present danger is that

‘I must assume responsibility for failure and deception, perhaps as a crisis in which communication can for the first time grow, perhaps as a disaster which I can not understand.’<sup>3</sup>

This admission of the danger of nescience, coupled with the affirmation of its necessity, insures us against ever conceiving of

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

the truth as fixed and dogmatic rather than as communicative and therefore endlessly fluid and growing. Once truth is thought to have been achieved, communication ceases, and the truth which is 'ever' becoming breaks off in a dismal 'never'.

Now this description of the mode of truth-seeking parallels almost exactly Indian attempts to keep the truth-seeker moving and to prevent his settling for anything less than the living truth. The highest point reached in the attempt to define God is that signified by the Sanskrit words '*Neti, neti* (Not this, not that)'. Whatever is settled upon as a definition of God must be transcended, and the mind must keep stretching farther and farther.

'The idea which grasps Transcendence from the unfulfilment of all communication and from the shipwrecking of every form of truth in the world is like a proof of God: from the unfulfilment of every sense of truth and under the assumption that truth must be, thought touches upon Transcendence.'<sup>1</sup>

Such statements as this of Jaspers, dwelling on the possible failure of communication, might constitute a commentary on the negative means of definition signified by '*Neti, neti*'.

It is in stressing the on-going process of communication rather than its static by-products that Existentialism again moves very close to a characteristic posture of Indian thought, one expression of which is the Jain doctrine of *syadvada*. This holds that 'every judgement that we pass in daily life about any object is, therefore, true only in reference to the standpoint occupied and the aspect of the object considered'.<sup>2</sup> The Jains consequently have no quarrel with any philosophical system, for each is considered to be an account of the many-sided universe from one perfectly valid point of view, and each can be the bearer of valuable insights if the system is supplemented by all the others, just as, in the fable, all the blind men's perceptions of the elephant are true

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> S. C. Chatterjee and D. Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (Calcutta, 1954), p. 82.

and must be taken into consideration. As if in elucidation of this doctrine, Jaspers says,

'To recognize philosophically this multiplicity of truths can seem fickle. One can object: only a single truth is the truth absolutely, if not for God at least for man; man can not act categorically if he does not believe his truth to be the only one.

'To this there is a reply. Since it is impossible for man to have Transcendence in time as a knowable object, identical for everybody like something in the world, every mode of the One Truth as absolute in the world can in fact only be historical: unconditional for this Existenz but, precisely for this reason, not universally valid. For since it is not impossible, but only psychologically infinitely difficult, for a man to act according to his own truth, realizing at the same time the truth of others which is not truth for him, holding fast to the relativity and particularity of all universally valid truths—since it is not impossible, he must not shirk this highest demand of truthfulness which is only apparently incompatible with that of others.'<sup>1</sup>

Both the Existentialists and Indian thinkers recognize the difficulty of resisting the urge to dogmatize, but both name such resistance as the price of that knowledge of the truth which is always moving and growing and communicating on its way toward an unknown goal, which Jaspers defines, Hindu-fashion, as 'a possibility which never betrays itself'.<sup>2</sup>

### III

It is in the varied and often not completely reconcilable Existentialist speculations concerning Nothingness that we perhaps come closest to a key concept which may unlock for us the rich treasures of Indian thought. To shift to another image, we may call Existentialism, and nowhere more strikingly than in its concepts of Nothingness, a suspension bridge across which the

<sup>1</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

West may move, not in crowds but single-file, towards the fundamental Indian concepts of *nirvana*, *maya*, and *moksha*. In an essay 'What is Metaphysics?' Heidegger suggests the relationship of philosophy to Nothing:

'Philosophy is only set in motion by leaping with all its being, as only it can, into the ground-possibilities of being as a whole. For this leap the following things are of crucial importance: firstly, leaving room for what-is-in-totality; secondly, letting oneself go into Nothing, that is to say, freeing oneself from the idols we all have and to which we are wont to go cringing; lastly, letting this "suspense" range where it will, so that it may continually swing back again to the ground-question of metaphysics, which is wrested from Nothing itself:

'Why is there any Being at all—why not far rather Nothing?'<sup>1</sup>

This initial leap into 'the ground possibilities of being as a whole' bears in anticipation the mark of the ultimate state of *moksha*, in which one will have succeeded permanently in shaking loose from all the idols and in maintaining ultimate freedom to explore 'what-is-in-totality'. This creative state of suspense, when described from the viewpoint of the venturing spirit, is called *moksha* or release.

That the vigorous and wide-ranging exploration of Nothing may send the explorer to the very foundations of Being should alert us to the fact that we are dealing here with the kind of fundamental dualism in which, because of the interrelatedness of the two parts, neither half may with impunity be disregarded. Nothing and Being, if we may speak thus simply, are necessary to each other and cannot ultimately be separated. Sometimes in the search for Being we encounter its negative and deceptive aspect, the Nothingness which distorts and all but destroys Being. This effect we attribute to the operation of *maya*, the veil of Being. When we encounter Being in its positive phase, we have seized, miraculously, upon *nirvana*, which may be characterized as the

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 349.



Nothingness which subsumes and encompasses Being. Perhaps all this is comparable to the developing concept in nuclear physics of the particle and its antiparticle, which are alike in many respects but which if they met, would annihilate each other. This analogy offers a clue to the function of *maya*, which mediates between positive and negative Being and yet keeps them from meeting head-on.

For an example of an existential situation involving both Nothingness and Being (that is, negative and positive Being, or, if you will, positive and negative Nothingness) let us see how Jaspers in the following description implies that there are positive seeds within Nothingness itself which may well germinate and develop into a complex world-view of which *maya*, or the veil of Being, *moksha*, or freedom from *maya*'s delusion, and *nirvana*, or Nothingness-Being, are but feeble attempts at description:

'... when in philosophizing the point is reached where everything stops, where the self sees itself before nothingness or the divinity, then it is important for the movement of thought, as far as it can, not to sink through the vacuum into the absolutely groundless, but rather to hold the thinker open for the encounter with Being, which only becomes perceptible to each when he comes upon himself, does not leave himself out, and, so to speak, is given to himself.'<sup>1</sup>

What is Being, as used here, but the Indian Brahman to which one penetrates as understanding the superficiality and expendability of *maya* or appearance, he perceives the oneness of Atman, the divine spark within the individual, with Brahman, the undying conflagration which is the true life-centre of all beings—when he is, 'so to speak ... given to himself' and, on the threshold of achieving *moksha*, is left 'free for Transcendence'? *Nirvana*, the unremitting consciousness of Ultimate Reality (Brahman), into which such *moksha* or freedom from the illusions of *maya* flows, is, according to the *tathata* philosophy, 'not nothingness,

<sup>1</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

but *tathata* (suchness or thatness) in its purity unassociated with any kind of disturbance which produces all the diversity of experience [*maya*].<sup>1</sup> The 'thatness' of *nirvana* marks its positive face, its opposite face being accurately described as null and void because obscured or distorted by the veils of *maya*. *Nirvana* is, therefore, from the viewpoint of men involved in *maya* 'nothingness', but from the viewpoint of those who have obtained *moksha*, or liberation from illusion, 'thatness', just as the Christian gospel was to the Greeks foolishness but to the Christians the power of God unto salvation. It should be noted that a kinderview of *maya* holds that *maya* sometimes obscures, sometimes reveals *nirvana*, according to the degree of *moksha* enjoyed by the seeker.

As we might expect from our study of ambiguity, there are two possibilities present at any crucial moment of decision such as that described above where, as Jaspers says, 'the self sees itself before nothingness or the divinity'. It is concentration upon such crises which has led the Existentialists to centre their ethics in choice, indeed to insist that man is a product of his choices and creates himself bit by bit as he chooses. These are the same possibilities which Pascal had in mind when he described man as faced with the necessity of making a wager—God or vacuum. As Tennyson says in the person of Ulysses when he makes the last great choice of his life,

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;  
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles. . . .

The individual may at this point in his career slip into the vacuum of essential groundlessness by becoming hopelessly entangled in the veil of *maya*, or he may lay hold upon divinity by rending the veil. Of course, this last image is extreme, but, as we have said, *maya* may be looked upon both as obscuring truth from the slothful and as revealing it—by glimpses—to the earnest seeker after *moksha*. At this point of decision the individual experiences an

<sup>1</sup> S. Das Gupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, (Cambridge, 1951-55) I, 136.

understandable dread of the abyss (*maya*-illusion-nothing) yawning at this feet, and this experience threatens to interrupt communication with nirvana-truth-Being forever.

'One of the essential theatres of speechlessness is dread in the sense of the terror into which the abyss of Nothing plunges us. Nothing, conceived as the pure "Other" than what-is, is the veil of Being. In Being all that comes to pass in what-is is perfected from everlasting.'<sup>1</sup>

The crucial question is whether a man shall see Nothing as a yawning abyss and so be drawn into it or, by a shift of viewpoint, as veiled Being and so achieve freedom from illusion (*moksha*) and freedom to 'come upon himself, not to leave himself out, or, so to speak, [be] given to himself'. In spite of undeniable dangers, can we make use of Nothing to catch the outlines of Being, glimpses of *nirvana*? The Sankara school of Vedanta, no doubt by struggles comparable to those of the Existentialists, has succeeded in achieving this stance, as Das Gupta indicates when talking of 'the relation of being and appearance in Vedanta:

'This independent and uncontradicted self-shiningness [of consciousness] constitutes being. . . . All being is pure consciousness, and all appearance hangs on it as something which is expressed by a reference to it and apart from which it has no conceivable status or meaning.'<sup>2</sup>

Though the delusions of *maya* have no validity, we may through the changing veil itself discern the 'self-shiningness' of being.

Something of this revelatory and even creative aspect of *maya* is hinted at when Heidegger says that the world as we experience it rests ultimately on Nothingness, and in consequence he transforms the old proposition *ex nihilo nihil fit* into

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

<sup>2</sup> Das Gupta, *op. cit.*, II, 36.

'*ex nihilo omne ens qua ens fit*; every being, so far as it is a being, is made out of nothing. Only in the Nothingness of *Da-sein* can what-is-in-totality—and this in accordance with its peculiar possibilities, i.e. in a finite manner—come to itself.'<sup>1</sup>

Thus 'Science [which experiments with the raw material of *maya*] can only come to terms with itself when it does not abandon Nothing'.<sup>2</sup> Again we have the indispensable polarity of Nothing and Being stressed, a polarity whose very tension depends upon one pole's always threatening to absorb (or annihilate) the other.

It must be remembered that there are almost as many concepts of nothingness as there are Existentialists, a variety that can always be matched by the multifariousness of Indian schools of thought, and it almost seems that in both cases philosophy is kept alive by the continually varied modes of philosophical experience.

As for *moksha*, Heidegger, with refreshing insight, pushes his concept of freedom very close to the Indian border.

'But if existent *Da-sein*, understood as the letting-be of what-is, sets man free for his "freedom" which confronts him, then and only then, with a choice between actual possibilities and which imposes actual necessities upon him, then freedom is not governed by human inclination. Man does not "possess" freedom as a property, it is the contrary that is true: freedom, or existent, revelatory *Da-sein*, possesses man and moreover in so original a manner that it alone confers upon him that relationship with what-is-in-totality which is the basis and distinctive characteristic of his history. . . .

'Freedom, so understood as the letting-be of what-is, fulfils and perfects the nature of truth in the sense that truth is the unconcealment and revealment of what-is. "Truth" is not the mark of some correct proposition made by a human "subject" in respect of an "object" and which then—in precisely what

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, *op. cit.*, pp. 346-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

sphere we do not know—counts as “true”; truth is rather the revelation of what-is, a revelation through which something “overt” comes into force.’<sup>1</sup>

This contrasts markedly with the conception of freedom usually preached by the social scientists, which is on the same plane as the truth which is ‘the mark of some correct proposition’. Both freedom and truth are conceived of by the Existentialist in terms of experiences which prepare the way for an understanding of this description of *nirvana* or the final state of emancipation and Brahman-knowledge:

‘The mukti stage is one in which the pure light of Brahman as the identity of pure intelligence, being and complete bliss shines forth in its unique glory, and all the rest vanishes as illusory nothing. As all being of the world-appearance is but limited manifestations of that one being, and so all pleasures also are but limited manifestations of that supreme bliss, a taste of which we all can get in deep dreamless sleep.’<sup>2</sup>

The *maya* which in the end disappears was the sand rope by which nothing could be bound. It was the veil which caused the conch and the coiled rope to be mistaken for silver and a serpent. It was, nevertheless, nothing, i.e. nothing life-promoting, as the flooding light revealed. According to Gaudapada,

‘When the highest truth is realized, *maya* is not removed, for it is not a thing, but the whole world-illusion is dissolved into its own airy nothing never to recur again.’<sup>3</sup>

Such an experience propels the individual far out beyond the realm of everyday communication, though in this experience communication as we described it several pages back—argument, dialectic, the shared and sharpened thought—finds its justification.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 308-9.

<sup>2</sup> Das Gupta, *op. cit.*, I, 491.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 470.

'This ultimate state is indescribable through language. It can only be felt and realized intuitively without the application of logical faculty or of the sense-organs. It can be referred to only by means of images. It is transcendental by nature, ultimate and absolutely without any support. It is the mere being which reveals itself in the joy of the soul.'<sup>1</sup>

If this is heady stuff when we read about it in the Indian philosophers, we can at least take comfort in the fact that the Existentialists have unwittingly been jockeying us into a position from which we can launch forth on such seas with some hope of making our way successfully to port—shadowed always by the risk of dread, boredom, and inert nothingness with which all men are threatened.

The ethics of Vedanta has for its goal the realizing of the unveiled Brahman, the epiphany, the ultimate reality we have been concerned with above, and so the achievement of *moksha* or freedom. But between man as he is and man as he hopes to be lies the vast realm which we have heard the Existentialists describe in terms of clashing opposites, of partial truths. One of the distinctive achievements of Hindu thought has been the ample provision which it makes for the various stages which men reach in this realm along the road to Brahman. The views of Brahman from any two of these stages might, if they were juxtaposed, be seen to conflict, but as we have understood by the doctrine of *syadvada*, each is appropriate to the stage or level of experience—just as the man who dreams considers the contents of his dream real until he moves out of the dream state. Vedantic ethics, therefore, recommends a variety of activities suited to the stage which the individual has reached along the road to *moksha*, which he may never achieve since it consists in a kind of freedom he could hardly have appreciated when he first set out and which he may never fully fathom.

Implicit in such a system is a kind of built-in silencer of criticism like the response of the parent who says to his child, 'You'll

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 28.

never understand all this until you have children of your own'. How can the child who has gone a third of the way understand the position of the man who has come full circle? The implication is that the misunderstanding is the result of insufficient experience, and therefore if one objects that he does not want to be free from this realm of clashing half-truths, he may nevertheless be assured that he will not eventually mind growing up and leaving behind the playthings of his youth; that when the liberator arrives with his key, the prisoner will not want to cling to his accustomed manacles.

The implications of this Vedantic view are anticipated in the Upanishads, whose insistence upon the 'joy of harmony . . . to be derived from the struggle of discordant elements'<sup>1</sup> underlies Vedanta. Movement and development are key words in this intermediate realm, as in Existentialism, and without the contradictions there could be no life of the spirit, yet man must not lose himself in the contradictions and become so at home there that he forgets his ultimate goal. 'An intellectual knowledge of diversity without the intuitive realisation,' says Radhakrishnan, 'is worse than the blind ignorance of faith, bad as it is.'<sup>2</sup> And he quotes the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: "All who worship what is not knowledge enter into blind darkness; those who delight in knowledge enter, as it were, into greater darkness".<sup>3</sup> Hence the perils of not recognizing the one spirit of which the partial and clashing phenomena observable in the world are simply a manifestation. Whoever rests content this side of Brahman has miscalculated his position; and whoever is totally absorbed in the journey, with no concern for its outcome, cannot truly perceive the significance of even the discordant elements in the midst of which he operates. Indeed, were it not for the Brahman beyond and within the life of this world, the world could not subsist. 'Everything seeks a good beyond itself, tries to rid itself of its finiteness and become perfect.'<sup>4</sup> In this continual movement

<sup>1</sup> Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* (London; Allen and Unwin, 1956), I, 180.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* See also *Isa Upanishad*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 203.

toward what Jaspers would call Being or Transcendence or the Encompassing (symbolized by the movement of the earth itself), 'the finite,' as Radhakrishnan says, 'seeks self-transcendence' in the only way in which it can, that is, by maintaining itself continually on the stretch toward the Infinite. Jaspers, for the Existentialists, describes the situation this way:

'Being itself is that which shows an immeasurable number of appearances to inquiry, but it itself always recedes and only manifests itself indirectly as that determinate empirical existence we encounter in the progress of our experiences and in the regularity of processes in all their particularity. We call it the World.'<sup>1</sup>

Thus a kind of dynamic polarity is set up, if we can think of one pole as responsible for the very existence of the other. The Real becomes the *raison d'être* of the unreal. (And if here the reader has been unwittingly tolled down the path toward a view of the world as *maya*, this concept will perhaps now seem not totally incomprehensible.)

More than one historian of Indian philosophy points out that this working of the Infinite in the finite does not constitute what is usually meant by Pantheism—'things . . . thrown together into a heap called God, without unity, purpose, or distinction of values. . . . It is pantheism, if it is pantheism to say that God is the fundamental reality of our lives, and we cannot live without Him.'<sup>2</sup> Starting from the Vedic description of *purusha* as the power which '*pervades* the world, but also remains beyond it,' Professors Chatterjee and Datta suggest the term 'Panentheism', from Western theology, as more accurate than Pantheism for the description of belief in a Reality at once transcendent and immanent. 'All is not equal to God, but all is *in* God, who is greater than all.'<sup>3</sup> Put in this way, there is no doubt as to where Reality inheres—the Reality, that is, which Emerson, in the West, tried to indicate by adapting a device from the Germans (and/or Plato) when he set it over against but not in divorce from reality.

<sup>1</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Chatterjee and Datta, *op. cit.*, p. 360 (also p. 372).



The Jain principle of seven-fold prediction when applied to the non-absolute or the finite, according to Satkari Mookerjee, leaves it solidly in place as a real concept and he concludes that

'The non-absolute is constituted of absolutes as its elements and as such would not be possible if there were no absolute. If it be permitted to employ an imagery, the non-absolute may be compared with a tree and its absolute elements with the branches and members of the same. As the tree disappears if the branches and members are taken out, the non-absolute would similarly vanish if the absolute elements were not there.'<sup>1</sup>

Again the concept of *maya* is illuminated from another angle.

The Jains hold, too, that 'From the mind conditioned in space and time we reach a mind through which alone space and time arise,'<sup>2</sup> just as the non-absolute tree exists by virtue of its absolute branches and just as various asramas, none universally effective, can point the soul to Brahman in 'a grand coalescence of the Ideal and the real.'<sup>3</sup> The Jain emphasis upon the fact that the spiritual and the material, although perhaps opposed to each other, 'do not seem to be opposed to the unity which is a synthesis of opposites'<sup>4</sup> leads to the hypothesis of 'a concrete universal, a reality at once divided and united. . . . The struggle of opposites is present in all degrees of reality, though their opposition is overcome in the harmony of the absolute.'<sup>5</sup> This sounds very much like the metaphysical counterpart of Jaspers' 'un-fanatical absoluteness . . . a decisiveness which remains open.'<sup>6</sup>

What, then, of the problem of contradiction, both in Existentialism and in Indian philosophy? First of all, both agree that man must learn to live with contradictions as the very stuff out of which the higher truth is wrought, not contradictions for their

<sup>1</sup> *The Jaina Philosophy of Non-Absolutism* . . . (Calcutta, 1944), p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, I, 339.

<sup>3</sup> Anil K. Ray Chaudhuri, *The Doctrine of Maya*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta, 1950), p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, I, 339.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

own sake but contradictions as the necessary language of truth when it is stepped down to the plane of man's intellect, where the Word must express itself through words. Both Buddhism and the Upanishads assume that 'the unseen reality cannot be comprehended by the logical intellect',<sup>1</sup> and hence contradictions become an inevitable part of communication. Existentialism, which is based on similar assumptions, is merely the present culmination of a long tradition of anti- or supra-rationalism. Whether rational thought is considered to be incapable by its nature of encompassing the whole truth or whether it is considered only partially equipped and in need of supplementation by feeling or intuition, the contradiction which it falls into does not seem to either the Existentialists or the Indians to be an intellectual crime. Contradiction merely breaks the ground for new construction or shocks a complacent rationalism into a recognition of its own inadequacy. The Jains, as we have seen, have made most creative use of contradiction by first of all taking out its sting. It is only the person who is looking for a single, simple explanation (the 'one exclusive exegesis') who is dismayed when rational explanations contradict each other. Says Jainism:

'It is irrelevant that contradictions occur, for each explanation is true from its own standpoint or *naya*. Then how can they clash? All the *nayas* are right in their own respective spheres—but if they encroach upon the province of other *nayas* and they try to refute their views, they are wrong. A man who holds the view of the cumulative character of truth (*anekantajna*) never says that a particular view is right or that a particular view is wrong.'<sup>2</sup>

What might appear, under other circumstances, to be a dangerous and intellectually irresponsible relativism thus is transmuted into a subtle insurance against mistaking fragments for the whole

<sup>1</sup> Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, I, 42.

<sup>2</sup> S. Radhakrishnan and C. A. Moore, eds. *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (London, 1957), p. 270. From Pandita Bechardasji Dashi, tr., *Siddhasena Divakara's Sanmati Tarka* (Bombay, 1939) chap. 1.

which they feebly mirror. The doctrine of *anekatajna* welcomes all partial truths and compares them not with each other (the operation *par excellence* whence contradictions arise) but with a potential and all-inclusive oneness to which all may contribute.

For example the Jain concept of change is not in conflict with that of persistence. This opposition is recognized as a mere creation of the insufficient intellect. In experience the two are intertwined.

'It is the presupposition of change that the identity of the thing undergoing change is maintained in spite of the change that happens to it. It changes and persists in the same act. Change has no meaning without persistence and the contradiction between change and persistence is only apparent.'<sup>1</sup>

As Heidegger says, as if in echo,

'After man has placed himself in the presence of something perpetual, then only can he expose himself to the changeable, to that which comes and goes; for only the persistent is changeable.'<sup>2</sup>

Thus one can say either that out of contradictions the real is forged or that the contradictions themselves are not real but only apparent. Here, from another angle, is a possible meaning for *maya*: the unreality which includes conflict and contradiction yet achieves a momentary transcendence of these through *darsana*, or soul-sight—a transcendence which augurs well for the final triumph of a sustained reality or *nirvana*. Surely this view of *maya* could offend no Western thinker, who is also, presumably, trying to cut through the unreal and arrive at the real and who would not willingly cling forever to the temporary scaffolding of contradictions which is meant to help him raise the house of truth.

It is true that some Existentialism advertises itself as atheistic and some as theistic, but both by their conviction that existence precedes essence are driving toward a Oneness indescribable

<sup>1</sup> Mookerjee, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

except in terms of paradox. As we read in the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad*, this Brahman is 'unseen but seeing, unheard but hearing, unperceived but perceiving, unknown but knowing.'<sup>1</sup> As the thinker moves through paradox and beyond it, he steps out into that realm of experience where he is headed at last toward the perhaps never completely expressible freedom from categories which has been designated *moksha*.

'We have to pass beyond thought, beyond the clash of oppositions, beyond the antinomies that confront us when we work with the limited categories of abstract thinking, if we are to reach the real where man's existence and divine being coincide. It is when thought becomes perfected in intuition that we catch the vision of the real. The mystics the world over have emphasized this fact. Pascal dwells on the incomprehensibility of God, and Bossuet bids us not to be dismayed by the divergencies, but regard them all trustfully as the golden chains that meet beyond mortal sight at the throne of God.'<sup>2</sup>

This is a transmutation of all contradictions, effected by our seeing their ultimate tendency and thus stripping them of all terror. As experience leads on toward essence, man must not shrink from the motionless confrontation of the changeless Brahman, no matter how often he has insisted upon action as the road to truth. One's restless soul finally arrives at 'the still point of the turning world', where the opposition of subject and object is dissolved. As Radhakrishnan footnotes the theism of the Gita,

'All action is the cause of bondage, since it is dependent on the false sense of duality. When true wisdom abolishes our ideas of duality, the soul is saved, and no action has any meaning thereafter.'<sup>3</sup>

Jaspers describes a similar state when he says,

<sup>1</sup> Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, I, 174.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 176.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 531n.

'The stillness of the being of truth in Transcendence—not by abandoning the modes of the Encompassing, but in surpassing their worlds—such is the boundary where what the whole is beyond all division can momentarily flash out. . . . Its experience is absolutely historical, in time out beyond time. One can speak out of this experience, but not of it. The ultimate in thinking as in communication is silence.'<sup>1</sup>

But we must remember that this represents an ultimate and not a proximate stage of our development—at best a probably intermittent and unpredictable achievement. We must once again move on through action, which cancels out the artificial dualisms of thought, into a realm in which action itself must be sloughed off as a brake on the spirit. Here perhaps can be grasped, and indeed is required, the concept of *nirvana* in all its positive aspects, which resemble the absolute branches without which the non-absolute tree could not exist. In a remarkably accurate and illuminating attempt to define the process of weaning the absolute from the non-absolutist details, Radhakrishnan defines *nirvana* as 'the simultaneity which is the support of all succession'.<sup>2</sup> On the road to this simultaneity we know only succession, but we feel that we know succession only because of the unknown simultaneity which is our goal. Never to move beyond succession is one of the philosophical risks we take. However, concentration upon the goal will keep us from mistaking any single moment of the succession for simultaneity, from mistaking the part for the ultimate whole, the signpost for the journey's end.

There are many other areas, too, in which Existentialism and Indian thought approximate each other and in which, therefore, Existentialist literature reminds one of Indian. For instance, there is Jaspers' insistence that 'man always becomes man by devoting himself to this other [Transcendence]'.<sup>3</sup> Only thus, says Jaspers, does man become real to himself. 'If man wants to grasp himself

<sup>1</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>2</sup> Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, I, 452.

<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

directly, he ceases to understand himself, to know who he is and what he should do.<sup>1</sup> Conversely,

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<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

CREATIVE SCEPTICS

'The stillness of the being of truth in Transcendence—not by abandoning the modes of the Encompassing, but in surpassing their worlds—such is the boundary where what the whole is ...

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directly, he ceases to understand himself, to know who he is and what he should do.<sup>1</sup> Conversely,

'In all modes of the Encompassing, the self can become genuinely certain of itself only as Existenz . . . so also I am Existenz only as I know Transcendence as the power through which I genuinely am myself.'<sup>2</sup>

Whatever Vedanta has preached about the ultimate oneness of the Atman and the Brahman is here re-echoed, as is Emerson's doctrine of Self-reliance. Indian thought is full of invitations to approach truth obliquely, rather than directly, if man is to apprehend it. True freedom or *moksha* is said to be found in self-transcendence. The Self alone, says the Gita, is the friend of the Self.<sup>3</sup> Jaspers reaches a similar insight when he says,

'To protect itself against the absolutization of limited, empirical things in the world, the known and the investigable, to hold itself free for Transcendence, and to preserve itself from the empty understanding and the endless formalization of speech which no longer comprehends, thought in its priority must actually be achieved in the clarity of unlimited, and yet always determinate, knowledge of knowledge; it must always reason in order to perceive that which is more than reason.'<sup>4</sup>

Again, when Jaspers refers to 'the single truth of man's Being' as 'a synthesis of polarities',<sup>5</sup> one is reminded of the same tendency in Indian thought toward the pulling together of opposites (what Dr Johnson seized upon as the distinguishing characteristic of the seventeenth-century metaphysical mind). In fact, Jaspers conceives of 'the universal history of philosophy' as striving 'towards a single, great, organized unity of opposites, which, at the boundaries, fail to yield solutions in Time and, in failing, bring to awareness the truth of Transcendent Being'.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Radhakrishnan and Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.



Indeed, what the Existentialists have done is by running a number of philosophical lines straight off the edge of a cliff into space, to point unmistakably toward Transcendence or Being, a concept whose strange and inseparable obverse is Nothingness and therefore whose link with *nirvana* is undeniable.

All these similarities undoubtedly spring from fundamentally similar conceptions of the nature of philosophy. To Jaspers it is 'the activity of thought itself by which the essence of man, in its entirety, is realized in the individual man. . . . At the summits the activity is the inner action by which I become myself; it is the revelation of Being. . . .'<sup>1</sup> What is this but a kind of Karma yoga similar to the Buddhist's equating Brahman with *dharma* or the Jain and Aurobindian emphasis upon experience as an ultimate source of knowledge?

Leaving these parallelisms to future exploration, let us concentrate, in conclusion, upon the basic method involved in Existentialism and in Indian philosophy as that method centres about nescience. A fruitful approach, by way of experience, to the concepts of *moksha*, *nirvana* and *maya* is provided by Jaspers' description in striking detail of 'all true philosophizing'. Man's inadequate and finite reason must have repeatedly been thrust back upon itself as he asked, '*Que sçais-je?*' Thus left epistemologically without a place to hide, man is broken or made according as he panics or exerts fresh creativity. 'Out of every position one may have adopted, i.e. out of every finitude, we are expelled; we are set *whirling*'.<sup>2</sup> This is the process by which one passes through the finite to the infinite if only one can, through nescience, release his hold on finitude and trust that the seeming vacuum will be filled by intimations of transcendence and not by 'seven other spirits more wicked than' the one expelled. In words which are reminiscent of Pascal, Jaspers says that true philosophizing (which is the equivalent of following a *dharma* in order to reach *moksha*)

'loosens us from the fetters of determinate thinking, not by abandoning such thinking but by pushing it to its limits. . . . The

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

plunge from the rigidities which were deceptive after all turns into the ability to stay in suspense; what seemed abyss becomes the space of freedom: the seeming Nothing turns into that from which true Being speaks to us.<sup>1</sup>

These words now sound familiar to us, and the ambivalence of 'abyss' and 'space of freedom' is understandable. What Jaspers delineates here reminds one of the man of simple faith who said that if God told him to jump through a stone wall, he would jump, and it would be God's responsibility to open the way for him.

At the crucial point in this philosophical experience, where by a shift of insight nothingness suddenly turns into Being and where the yawning abyss is transformed into the theatre of perfect freedom, no rational explanation is available. One can parallel the experience, however, with that of Jesus when in the darkest night of his soul, he cried from the cross, '*Eli'eli lama sabachthani*' ('My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'), as prelude to the glory of paradise. The leap which Pascal advocated was, as we have said, a similar kind of experience. Jaspers points out that in spite of what sometimes looks like the utter divergence of Kierkegaard from Nietzsche, both worked their way through this central philosophical experience, the symbol of which for both was the concept of an unknown God, the ultimate in nescience. An early poem of Nietzsche's reads:

I would know Thee, Unknown,  
Thou who grips deep in my soul,  
Wandering through my life like a storm,  
Thou inconceivable, my kin!  
I would know Thee, even serve Thee.<sup>2</sup>

Kierkegaard lamented those learned professors who were so unacquainted with nescience that they conceived of learning as developing along 'a line of direct progress, whose end they

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

lamented they would not survive to see'. Says Jaspers of such scholars

'They do not experience the maturity of that critical point where everything turns upside down, where one understands more and more that there is something which one cannot understand.'<sup>1</sup>

This is the *docta ignorantia* of Nicholas Cusanus. Nietzsche, too, deplored the existence of those 'who can not be themselves and who, with their ultimately futile knowledge, aspire to grasp Being itself.'<sup>2</sup> These thinkers who have never known nescience can never know Reality. It is clear that this idea comes remarkably close to that of the polarity of Being and Nothingness.

In analyzing the psychological processes which underlie anti-Semitism (or any other irrational persecution of one's fellow-man), Sartre shows its roots to lie in a fundamental distortion of the philosophical experience. In contrast to the persecutors is his picture of the rational man, who

'seeks the truth gropingly, [who] knows that his reasoning is only probable, that other considerations will arise to make it doubtful; he never knows too well where he's going, he is "open", he may even appear hesitant. But there are people who are attracted by the durability of stone. They want to be massive and impenetrable, they do not want to change: where would change lead them? This is an original fear of oneself and a fear of truth. And what frightens them is not the content of truth which they do not even suspect, but the very form of the true—that thing of indefinite approximation. It is as if their very existence were perpetually in suspension. They want to exist all at once and right away. They do not want acquired opinions, they want them to be innate; since they are afraid of reasoning, they want to adopt a mode of life in which reasoning and research play but a subordinate role, in which one never seeks but that which one has already found, in which one never becomes other than what one already was.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 274-5.

In Existentialism the West has come to see the necessity of an 'indefinite approximation', all the previous certainties having collapsed, and hence it should be in the mood to take advantage of the freedom which can be underwritten only by non-attachment to partial truths, a process which we have seen illustrated in the Jain doctrine of *syadvada*. The wrench of achieving such non-attachment was vividly expressed by Oliver Cromwell when he said to his followers, 'Remember, by the bowels of Christ, that you may be mistaken'.

There are countless Indian expressions of this same conviction of nescience. Radhakrishnan paraphrases Sankara by saying, 'A perfect relinquishment of our point of view seems to be the end of all progress'.<sup>1</sup> This is required because, as the Hebrew prophet makes God say to man, 'Thy ways are not my ways, nor thy thoughts my thoughts'. There are echoes of Platonism, too, in the definition of *nirvana* as 'purification of mind, its restoration to its primitive simplicity or radiant transparency'.<sup>2</sup> This is supported by the following words from the *Sarvadarsanasamgraha*:

'When by constancy of reflection we rid ourselves of all prejudgments, there arises knowledge freed from the illusions which take the form of objects, and this is called Mahodaya, the grand exaltation of emancipation.'<sup>3</sup>

Here we have perhaps a final, if summary, word on both *maya* and *moksha*. Nagarjuna traces all *avidya* (illusion, ignorance) to our attributing existence to things which do not exist, 'mistaking the phenomenal world for the noumenal reality'.<sup>4</sup> The paradoxical situation of man is put thus by Radhakrishnan, paraphrasing Nagarjuna:

'We cannot understand the transcendental reality except through the world of experience; and we cannot attain nirvana except through the understanding of the ultimate reality.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, I, 576.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 642.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 699.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

The furthest reach of man's paradoxical nescience is given classic expression in the *Kena Upanishad*.

It is conceived of by him by whom It is not conceived of.  
He by whom It is conceived of, knows it not.  
It is not understood by those who [say they] understand it.  
It is understood by those who [say they] understand It not.<sup>1</sup>

In a world where truth is comprehended only by those who are certain they do not know it, what could be more consistent than that the ideal man as portrayed in the Gita, should possess an imperturbability which has risen beyond dualisms?

'He who is satisfied with whatever comes by chance, who has passed beyond the dualities (of pleasure and pain), who is free from jealousy, who remains the same in success and failure—even when he acts, he is not bound.'<sup>2</sup>

To act thus, in complete non-attachment, is to perform through action a kind of sacrifice in which, as the Upanishad says, the husband, the wife, and all things on earth are dear not for their own sakes but for the sake of the Brahman which they incarnate. A seventeenth-century English poet expressed a similar idea in the lines,

Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws  
Makes that and th' action fine.

Sri Aurobindo in the nineteenth century set out on his quest for truth determined not to be hampered by adherence to any creed or system, for he wanted to do full justice to the complexity of the quest. In describing existence as an unknowable he gives one of the finest modern expressions of man's need to take his initial stand on nescience and provides a congenial atmosphere in which Western minds may come to understand the boundlessness of *nirvana* and the bondlessness of *moksha*.

<sup>1</sup> Radhakrishnan and Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

'An unknowable which appears to us in many states and attributes of being, in many forms of consciousness, in many activities of energy this is what Mind can ultimately say about the existence which we ourselves are and which we see in all that is presented to our thought and senses. It is in and through those states, those forms, those activities that we have to approach and know the Unknowable. But if in our haste to arrive at a unity that our mind can seize and embrace we identify the reality with any one definable state of being however pure and eternal, with any particular attribute however general and comprehensive, with any fixed formulation of consciousness however vast in its scope, with any energy or activity however boundless its application, and if we exclude all the rest, then our thoughts sin against its unknowableness and arrive not at a true unity but at a division of the Indivisible.'<sup>1</sup>

Jaspers in Germany seems to have been echoing the Bengali saint when he asserted, 'the possession of truth as though it were conclusively asserted in fact breaks communication off.'<sup>2</sup>

The subtlety of the Indian conception of nescience, which cherishes even illusion in its proper place, is further elucidated by Aurobindo in perpetuation of a philosophic tradition reaching back to the Upanishads.

'Only the positive and synthetic teaching of the Upanishads beholds *sat* [existence] and *asat* [non-existence] not as opposites destructive of each other, but as the last antinomy through which we look up to the Unknowable. And in the transactions of our positive consciousness, even unity has to make its account with multiplicity; for the many also are *Brahman*. It is by *vidya*, the knowledge of the oneness, that we know God; without it *avidya*, the relative and multiple consciousness, is a night of darkness and a disorder of ignorance. Yet if we exclude the field of that ignorance, if we get rid of *avidya* as if it were a thing non-existent and unreal, then knowledge itself becomes a sort of obscurity and a

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 582-3.

<sup>2</sup> Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

source of imperfection. We become men blinded by light so that we can no longer see the field which that light illumines.<sup>1</sup>

This again is reminiscent of the necessary polarity of Being and Nothingness. The Jain footnote to this tenderness for even *avidya* points out that our knowledge is not 'unreal or false, though undoubtedly it must be incomplete as we are at present constituted' <sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is what Heidegger means in a passage we have quoted before when he describes Being as necessarily veiled in Nothingness.

'One of the essential theatres of speechlessness is dread in the sense of the terror into which the abyss of Nothing plunges us. Nothing, conceived as the pure "Other" than what-is, is the veil of Being. In Being all that comes to pass in what-is is perfected from everlasting.'<sup>3</sup>

It must have been thoughts like these which attracted Schopenhauer, an acknowledged father of Existentialism, when he came upon them in the inadequate Latin translation of the Upanishads by Anquetil Duperron (1801-2). With a sense of having discovered what was for him a road to truth, Schopenhauer prefaces his *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* with these words:

'And if, indeed, in addition to this [Upanishads] he is a partaker of the benefit conferred by the Vedas, the access to which, opened to us through the Upanishads, is in my eyes the greatest advantage which this still young century enjoys over previous ones, because I believe that the influence of the Sanskrit literature will penetrate not less deeply than did the revival of Greek literature in the fifteenth century: if, I say, the reader has also received and assimilated the sacred, primitive Indian wisdom, then he is best of all prepared to hear what I have to say to him. . . . How does every line display its firm, definite, and throughout harmoni-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 583.

<sup>2</sup> Mookerjee, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

## EXISTENTIALISM

ous meaning! From every sentence deep, original, and sublime thoughts arise, and the whole is pervaded by a high and holy and earnest spirit. . . . It has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death!’<sup>1</sup>

In paying his tribute also to the same ancient Upanishadic philosophers, Aurobindo on the other side of the world unwittingly helps to clarify the Existentialist position.

‘But the steady eye of the ancient wisdom perceived that to know God really, it must know Him everywhere equally and without distinction, considering and valuing but not mastered by the oppositions through which He shines.’<sup>2</sup>

To do this is to maintain the kind of freedom which the term *moksha* is meant to signify, just as the oppositions themselves, which are to be transcended, constitute *maya*, and the goal of their transcendence is the oneness and undifferentiatedness of *nirvana*, Being, the Ground of Truth, Ultimate Reality.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Das Gupta, *op. cit.*, I, 40, from translation by Haldane and Kemp, I, xii, xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Radhakrishnan and Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 583.



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